

# Yalobusha Review

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# CASHING IN

Casey Pycior

Each weekday morning *Central Standard* enters the different worlds of Kansas City. Regular topics include business, personal finance, the environment, information technology, education, music, and the arts.

KCUR – Kansas City Public Media

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## Cashing In

Business correspondent Sheila Roland and a few listeners have a spirited discussion with Devon Jennings, founder of ProMourn, a local entrepreneur that's making waves.

"Cashing In" originally aired July 25, 2014. To listen to the full story, click [here](#).

**Sheila:** I'm speaking today with Devon Jennings, founder of ProMourn, an unusual local start-up. Join our conversation live by calling 816-555-KCUR, or email your questions and comments to [centralstandard@npr.org](mailto:centralstandard@npr.org). Find us on Facebook or Tweet us at @CentralStandard. We'd love to hear from you. Welcome to *Central Standard*, Devon.

**Devon:** Glad to be here, Sheila.

**Sheila:** So, for listeners who might not be familiar with ProMourn, start by telling us what it is and how the business came to be.

**Devon:** Well, Sheila, it all started about 3 years ago when my grandfather passed away. I didn't know him—he'd abandoned my mother when she was very young—so I wasn't affected emotionally by his death, and neither was my mother, really. The few memories she had of him weren't good ones. He drank and was verbally abusive. But at the visitation before his funeral, no one, aside from my mother, father, and me, showed up. For the first twenty minutes or so, the three of us stood next to the casket waiting to receive any mourners, and after an hour we'd

gravitated to the first row of chairs. The funeral director approached my mother and asked if she wanted to continue the visitation for the remaining two hours, and my mother cracked. She cried like I'd never seen—sobbed, actually. My father and I helped her to the car, and she was so distraught she didn't attend the funeral the next day.

**Sheila:** That must've been very difficult...

**Devon:** To see my mother like that? Yes. Much later I realized that what she was probably feeling was a kind of fear and...embarrassment. As I'm sure you've experienced, funerals remind us of our mortality like nothing else can, and no one wants to believe that when they pass on not a single person will mourn their death.

But to return to your original question, I didn't consciously think about ProMourn until later. People of my age, their parents are aging, and a number of my friends' parents died over the course of a year or so, and I was going to more and more funerals. Most of the deceased I didn't know, or if I did, not well, so it was as if I was being invited to these funerals to in some way share the grief load, if you will. Like the more people who are there grieving, the grief gets spread out and somehow is easier to bear. Last year, as I thought back over all the funerals, it seemed there was a definite need, whether or not people realized it, for a service that provided professional mourners to attend visitations, funerals, and even the after-funeral luncheons. So ProMourn was born.

**Sheila:** Wait, professional mourners?

**Devon:** Yes. Our mourners are trained—highly trained—in grief and grief expression.

**Sheila:** So...they're acting?

**Devon:** Absolutely not, Sheila. Our mourners are totally present in the moment. They *are* mourning our clients' departed loved ones. Their training is an intensive eight-week course designed to prepare them for the job.

**Sheila:** You're listening to *Central Standard* on KCUR, 89.3, and I'm talking with Devon Jennings, founder of ProMourn. Devon, can you give us a sense of what the training entails? I mean, how does one go about preparing, as you say, for this kind of work?

**Devon:** I'm not comfortable giving the specifics of our training program—it's one-of-a-kind—but I will tell you that throughout the eight weeks, our mourners are exposed to countless hours of...well, death. Footage of the Holocaust. Nine-eleven. Katrina. The Tsunamis in the south Pacific. Earthquakes and other disasters. Media coverage of school shootings and mass killings, both here and abroad. They're taught Affective Empathy – essentially they are trained to recognize and further develop our innate human capacity to empathize. There is also an element of Emotional Contagion, where they are trained to receive, or catch, the emotions of those around them. These are basic human functions only we strive to heighten them in our mourners.

**Sheila:** I'm sorry, Devon, but this training sounds just awful. Why would anyone want to become a professional mourner?

**Devon:** Sheila, we're in a state of almost continuous mourning already. Are we not? There is death and destruction everywhere we turn. Our mourners are just people, like you and me, who decided to turn the grief they feel on a daily basis into something more positive. They can focus the overwhelming feelings they have on our clients' loved ones. For that moment at least, their grief is not anonymous as it tends to be in daily life. They tell me that its honestly cathartic and for some it's even spiritual.

**Sheila:** So you haven't actually done it?

**Devon:** No. I leave that to the trained professionals.

**Sheila:** I see. Funerals are often steeped in religious tradition, so how does ProMourn handle that?

**Devon:** It depends on the client, Sheila. We cater to all faiths and denominations. Part of all of our mourners' training includes learning all the major world religions' doctrines on death and the afterlife. They study the death customs and traditions of different cultures and faiths. So, while our mourners aren't experts, per se, they can take part in nearly all religious funeral ceremonies. And we're working to hire mourners of every faith to better serve a diverse population. We've got Christians and Jews, Agnostics and Atheists, a small number of Muslims and Hindus. We even have a practicing Wiccan...and we're actively seeking Mormon and Jehovah's Witnesses mourners.

**Sheila:** We'd love to hear from our listeners. Call us at 816-555-KCUR or message us on Facebook or Twitter. So, Devon, who exactly are your clients?

**Devon:** The simple answer is they are people who have suffered the loss of a loved one and have a desire for people to mourn with them. But I think what you're really asking is why would someone pay for people to mourn for and with them? Am I right?

**Sheila:** Yes, especially with the rising costs of funerals.

**Devon:** For the reasons I mentioned before. Everyone wants to think people will mourn them when they die. In fact, we've even started a service where people dictate in their Wills what tier of service they want ProMourn to provide. We even have installment plans. Very similar to paying off burial plots while still living.

**Sheila:** Tiers of service?

**Devon:** Yes, we provide mourners at every price point. We recently did a funeral for a former celebrity who had fallen out of the limelight in her later years and wanted her funeral to be attended as it would have been during her heyday. As a way to kind of cement her legacy, so to speak.

We also do small, intimate services, too. And we just started providing free mourning services for indigents and people who have no family to mourn them. We believe it's important to mourn the loss of life, regardless of who the person was.

**Sheila:** We've got an email here from Brenda in Tonganoxie, and she writes: "I was listening and had to speak up. I had a similar situation in my family. My husband's father was just like your guest's grandfather, and so few people showed up to his funeral. It was mortifying. I could see it on the faces of the few people who came. They were embarrassed for my husband. I felt so sorry for him —my husband." She goes on to say at the end, "Please tell your guest that had we known about his company at the time, we probably would've used it."

**Devon:** Thank you, Brenda. I'm sorry to hear of your experience, though it exemplifies one role ProMourn can play.

**Sheila:** We've got Frank in KCK on the line. Frank?



Caller: Yeah, uh, I've never called into the radio before, but this clown you got on there now? I couldn't not call. This guy should be ashamed of himself. He's full of [expletive removed]—I mean crap. Sorry! Taking advantage of people like he does. It's sick. I just had to say it. Thanks.

Sheila: Thanks for your call, Frank. And remember callers, we're live on the air here.

Devon: Sheila, if I may? I'd just like to say to Frank, and to anyone listening, that ProMourn isn't taking advantage of anyone. We provide a service that people can choose to use or not use. We aren't forcing people to do anything. It's not as if some salesman is knocking on doors here. I just want to get the message out about what ProMourn is all about and what we offer. That's all.

Sheila: But aren't you, at the very least, cashing in on people's deaths?

Devon: Cashing in? I certainly wouldn't put it that crudely, but okay...who isn't? Pick a safety innovation of the last hundred years – seatbelts? Safety glass? Car seats? Life jackets? Elevator brakes? Are the developers of those devices and systems not cashing in on death? What about crime scene clean-up crews? Or homicide detectives? Organ donor services? What about the various ways politicians cash in on national tragedies? Not to even mention the whole funeral services industry. Should I go on?

Sheila: That's not necessary.

Devon: Look, no one likes to think about it, but death is an industry. I'm not cashing in any more than anyone else; even this radio program for that matter, for doing this interview. ProMourn is a service, just like any other. If a person thinks they might be interested, then he or she should check us out. I think what we do is good and necessary, perhaps now more than ever given our increasingly virtual world. This is about people sharing something real and true...something...human.

Sheila: We've got another caller, Hailey from Overland Park. Hailey, welcome to the show.

Caller: Yeah, hi, in light of the recent tornadoes in Louisburg, I find it incredibly insensitive, shocking even, for Mr. Jennings to be hocking his so-called service

and for the program itself to even be airing this. It's opportunistic on both counts, and I'm disgusted by it. How do you sleep at night?

Devon: First off, let me just say how saddened I am by the devastation in Louisburg. Like you, my thoughts and prayers are with the citizens of that community, especially the families of those who died. Second, I understand where you're coming from, I really do. But I'm not swooping into town trying to sign people up for our service. I'm not flaunting my business in their faces. I wouldn't do that, particularly not at a time like this. We're not the NRA holding a rally after a mass shooting. That's not us.

And to your comment about me being opportunistic...well, as I said, if I am, it's no more than anyone else.

Caller: Of course it is. Here this tragic thing has happened, and you're on the radio advertising a service—and I use that term loosely—

Devon: I didn't tell the radio station that I wanted to schedule this interview right after one of the most destructive tornadoes in the history of the region. If I could predict that, I'd be in a different business. Are you going to rail against the construction workers and contractors that make money rebuilding houses and buildings in Louisburg? By your logic I suppose they should work for free? What about when some company donates to the cause? You don't think, as much as what they are doing might help, that they're still not looking out for their bottom line? If Hy-Vee donates a bunch of food and water to the relief effort, do you not see how that's free advertisement for them? How people might choose to shop at Hy-Vee over, say, Price Chopper based on Hy-Vee's humanitarian efforts? I'm sorry, but it's naïve to think otherwise.

Caller: But a grocery store donating food and water isn't as blatantly opportunistic as what you're doing. I'm sorry, it just isn't.

Devon: If you are inclined to see it that way then I'm not going to change your mind. I'm sorry my company is being perceived that way because it certainly isn't our intent.

Sheila: Thank you for the call, Hailey. We appreciate it. I do want to reiterate, though, that we at *Central Standard* would never intentionally do something to offend our listeners. The stories and interviews we air are generally planned and scheduled far in advance. As Devon mentioned, we certainly didn't plan on this

interview in any way coinciding with some tragic event.

We've got another caller, Jacqueline from Lee's Summit. Welcome to the show, Jacqueline.

Caller: Hi Sheila, thanks for taking my call. I just had a comment for your guest... he said a moment ago something about how we are in a state of continual grief, or something like that? Well, I disagree. I don't mean to sound like I'm unaffected by what's going on in the world or anything, especially the local tragedies, but I consider myself a happy person, and I think it just comes down to how you see the world and choosing to look on the bright side of things. And there's already so much ugliness in the world, I think focusing on the positive is just good for everyone. Just wanted to throw that out there. Thanks!

Devon: With all due respect to the caller, what she calls looking on the bright side I call not paying attention or simply ignoring what's around you. But she's not alone in her views. In fact, I'm sure she's securely in the majority on this. And she's not wrong, either. It's much easier to ignore or choose to look on the bright side when death and awfulness surrounds us. It's a coping mechanism. It's difficult to function knowing the state the world's in. But I'd argue that ignoring it isn't the answer. So for truly empathetic people like my mourners, it gives them a chance to, as I said, turn the anonymous grief into something specific, and good things can come of that.

Sheila: So you're just doing some kind of favor for your mourners?

Devon: No, I didn't mean that. Only that the act of mourning our customer's lost loved ones connects our mourners to something communal and real. Real in a way that very little is real in today's world. And it's my belief, and the research bears this out, that communal mourning is a positive thing, psychologically speaking.

Sheila: Let's go to another caller. Ray's on the line. Ray, welcome to the show.

Caller: Yeah, uh, I was just flippin' channels on the dial and heard this. I'm actually working on a crew in Louisburg. A lot of us guys kinda migrate around, doin' this kind of work. We're not taking advantage of people. It's a just a job, and if I didn't do it, somebody else would. So, this guy your talking to? Seems it's no different to me.

Sheila: Thanks for that perspective, Ray. We've got our friend Clarence from Raytown on the line. Clarence, welcome back to the show.

Caller: I don't much get what this fella's sellin'. Funerals are for families and loved ones, not strangers. When my Margaret passed last year, I'd have been got-durn offended if some stranger showed up and tried to share my grief. But... the last I checked our country's still free and a man can do whatever he sees fit to make a livin' at. Didn't fight the Nazis for it to be any other way. That's all.

Sheila: Thanks, as always, Clarence. Nancy in Lenexa, welcome to *Central Standard*.

Caller: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. I've just got a quick comment for your guest, and I'll take the response off the air. Pardon my frankness, but ProMourn strikes me as you selling people on something they don't really need. Like, the service creates the need...Thanks.

Devon: Thanks for the comment, Nancy. I understand what you are saying, but isn't that the way of all modern innovation? We didn't know we needed the microwave oven until it was invented. The iPod? The smartphone? Special laundry detergent? Tooth-whitening strips? Organic food...the list goes on.

Obviously, I think ProMourn is necessary in a way that an iPod, for example, isn't. I saw what I thought was a very real need in the funeral service industry, and I strove to fill it with ProMourn, and I think we've done a good job so far.

Sheila: You're listening to *Central Standard* on KCUR, 89.3. If you are just joining us, I'm talking with Devon Jennings, founder of ProMourn. I see we've got another email. This one from Ed in North Kansas City. Ed writes: "Dear Sheila, I'm a big fan of the show. It gets at Kansas City in a way no other program does. Keep up the good work." Thanks, Ed. We think so too. Ed's email continues, "I couldn't help but notice that your guest's business is, well, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but it strikes me as an extremely capitalistic venture. Especially given the recent destruction in Louisburg." Devon, do you have a response for Ed?

Devon: This is a business segment, is it not? Pardon me, but does Ed write in to say this to the person who opens yet another frozen yogurt or coffee shop? What about the man who runs a landscaping business? Do you ask him if the reason he's mowing lawns and trimming hedges is a capitalistic venture? My

guess is you don't. Of course it's a capitalistic venture. I don't really want to harp on this, but since the caller brought it up, think about all the different businesses that will benefit, financially, in the rebuilding efforts in Louisburg in the coming months. Every step along the way, money is being made. From the demo and cleanup crews to all the different contractors: plumbers, electricians, dry wall crews, painters, masons, and on and on. Is the town going to get rebuilt better and stronger? Absolutely. But it's not going to be free.

Sheila: We've got time for one more call. Uh...let's see...Chris out in Gardner. Chris, welcome to the program.

Caller: Hi, thanks for taking the call. I'm pretty fascinated by this guy's idea, though I'm curious, what does a person get for their money? You mentioned tiers of service, can you say a bit more about it?

Devon: Sure, Chris. For a specific breakdown of our services and the costs, I'd direct you to our website, [www.ProMourn.com](http://www.ProMourn.com). But I can give you a general sense now. First, if there's time, say a person or their family has contacted us pre-death, we do what we can, and what the family or client allows, to get to know the person and their loved ones. We pride ourselves on our mourners' abilities to actually connect with the grieving family and to not simply anonymously grieve. It's in the connecting that real mourning happens. If there isn't as much time and we are contacted post-death, we ask several of the loved ones to fill out a short but thorough questionnaire about the deceased.

Sheila: That's all the time we have for today. I'd like to thank all our listeners and anyone who called into today show—

Devon: Excuse me, Sheila? Can I just say one more thing with regard to the Louisburg tragedy?

Sheila: Sure, Devon. Go right ahead.

Devon: For the record, ProMourn sent a number of mourners to work the many funerals and remembrances in Louisburg following the tornadoes, free of charge and without, until now, anyone knowing.

But that's not the point I want to make here. Look at the outpouring of support for that community. I mean, all across Kansas City—and the region at large—people have come together and not only donated time and money to search and

rescue and clean up but have shared in that community's grief. We came together in a way that rarely happens in this city, except for when something truly awful occurs, like the Louisburg tornados. Or back in '88 when those firemen were killed in that construction site explosion. Or the floods in '93. Or the way the city rallied itself around finding the identity of Precious Doe. Or our outrage in the wake of the recent shootings at the Jewish Center in Overland Park. And nationally, with nine-eleven and Katrina...in the wake of tragedy we come together and share our grief. We mourn communally, and it helps. It really does. That's all we're trying to do at ProMourn. Help people.

Sheila: Thank you for visiting with us, Devon.

Devon: Sheila, thanks for the time. I would like to add, if I may, that if any of your listeners are interested in purchasing a ProMourn service, if they mention this interview we'll take 15% off the price.

Sheila: And where can listeners find out more about your service?

Devon: Log onto ProMourn.com.

Sheila: Very good. Thank you, Devon. For more information about the people and places featured this week on *Central Standard*, please check us out at [www.kcur.org](http://www.kcur.org). Thank you for listening. I'm Sheila Roland, we hope you join us tomorrow.

Showing 1 of 1 Comments

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Anonymous 3 days ago

I tried to call during the show, but I couldn't get through. I just wanted to say we used ProMourn for a recent death in our family, and Devon's team of mourners were all we could have asked for. The mourners were so respectful and courteous, and...present at the funeral, I soon forgot that they weren't part a part of our family and that we had paid for their them to be there. I highly recommend ProMourn.

Karen Shepard

Reply Share

Devon 2 days ago

Karen,  
Thanks for the comment! I'm sorry your call didn't go through. There were so many callers that didn't get on the show, and I'm sure more than a few were former clients such as yourself trying to give positive testimonials for ProMourn's services. It would have been great to get your story on the air.

Reply Share

Anonymous 1 days ago

SUFFERING FROM ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION?? NO MORE! SIMPLY GO TO WWW.FREEVIAGRAFORLIFE.COM AND SIGN UP TODAY!!!

Reply Share

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Casey Pycior earned his MFA in fiction writing at Wichita State University and his PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He was awarded the 2015 Charles Johnson Fiction Prize at *Crab Orchard Review*, and his stories have also appeared in *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *Midwestern Gothic*, *Harpur Palate*, *Wigleaf*, and *BULL* among many other places. His collection of short stories is forthcoming in late 2016 from Switchgrass Books. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska with his wife and son.

# HOW TO PLAY THE BLUES

Rosanna Durst

When Frankie comes into the kitchen, ask if he wants to see your thong. He's soaked in sweat. Pieces of grass stick to his sneakers. He pockets the cash your mother left for him on the kitchen counter, then scratches his head.

"Thong?" he asks.

Say, "It's like underwear." Unbutton your shorts.

He looks at you, proud. "I wear boxers," he says.

"And I wear a thong. Want to see?"

Again, he scratches his head. He's ten years older than you, though his body is lanky like he never grew into it. At the neighborhood pool, he used to throw you and the other kids up into the air and yell, "Water bomb!" He was skinny then too, in bright red swim trunks, body long and white with smears of sunscreen. His hands were gentle around your waist as he lifted you out of the pool, never roaming or lingering too long. He's really the only guy you've ever felt comfortable around. Even your mother trusts him enough to allow him over when she's not home. He mows lawns throughout the neighborhood each summer. This year he does the yard for your mother every other Friday.

"Okay," he says, his voice softer now.

Listen for the sound of your grandmother snoring in the living room. Soft and steady over a rerun of *Oprah*. Check the clock on the kitchen wall, too, and make sure it's not time for your mother to come home. Then do it.

Pull down your shorts.

He looks at you, eyes wide, curious. Turn around so he can see the sliver of purple between your cheeks. Say, "This is my first thong ever." Say, "You like it?"

When he doesn't respond, turn back around and face him. Feel excited, nervous,



as he stares down at the thong where traces of pubic hair emerge from the edges.  
He looks like a child who just tasted ice cream for the first time.

“You like it, Frankie?”

He nods. “Yeah, yeah.”

Notice the bulge in his shorts.

Your mother says he’s a high-functioning autistic, but you don’t like that term, *high-functioning*. It sounds like something stale and inhuman. You didn’t plan to show him the thong – it’s something you only decided today, you just really needed to show someone – and it’s not like you have some kind of crush on him. It’s just you don’t know how to talk to boys your own age and you had your first period a couple months ago and more than anything, you want to know what it’s like to be desired. Because men aren’t something your mother discusses. Your father, a man named Hank Mitchell Waters, took off for Memphis with his band shortly before you were born.

To play the blues, your mother says.

You were around him a handful of times as a toddler, but his face is just a white blur in your mind. You’ve never even been to the state of Tennessee. All you remember is he smells like cigarettes and sweat, has long fingers, and he loves his music more than he loves your mother or you.

As Frankie stares, push away any embarrassment, any guilt. And for the love of God, don’t cover yourself. Let him see you.

He still looks at your crotch. “Thong,” he whispers.

“Don’t tell anyone. Not even your mom, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Let him look at you a while longer until Mumsy’s snoring stops. When he thanks you as he leaves – “Thanks, Janie” – try not to feel gross. Believe you’ve done a good thing.

Tell yourself you won’t do it again.

Your mother's name is Abigail Grace Matthews. She makes cheesy scrambled eggs every day for breakfast, but she never eats them herself because she hates eggs. She loves the smell of nail polish. She says the cost of living on Daniel Island is eating into her retirement fund, but she's convinced it's the best place in South Carolina to raise a child. It's the kind of place where kids can roam around without supervision, the kind of place doors are left unlocked. Mothers drive their kids to school on golf carts. The neighborhood pool is like something from a Disney World resort.

Mumsy has lived with you and your mother for the past three years. She's demented, your mother says, but no way in hell will she end up in a nursing home. Your mother works at one and she says they're shit. But Mumsy's condition has worsened recently. Her walk is stiffer, slower, and even though she still has that sweet, grandmotherly side to her, she has these angry streaks now too. Sometimes she curses at your mother in Italian: *Puttana!* Or, your favorite: *Vaffanculo*. Fuck off. Your mother brushes these remarks away and says it's just what some people do when they get old. They get mean. They feel powerless, she says, at losing their independence. Sometimes anger seems like the best tool they've got left.

It's your job to look after Mumsy this summer while your mother works. Mostly you watch daytime talk shows with her. (Don't change the channel on *Days of Our Lives* or she'll call you a fucking baby and refuse to eat her lunch.) Once you helped dye her hair jet black, and you paint your nails a new color each week. Many Cheez-Its and popsicles have been consumed. Sometimes you also download blues music on the family computer and save it to a secret folder titled "COOL PEOPLE ONLY." Mostly B.B. King since you read he's the King of the Blues. His music sounds muffled and old, but you can hear the emotion in the songs—the pull of guitar strings, the gruff in his voice, the ache—and you have this idea that one day you'll share B.B. King with your father.

*Baby, how blue can you get?* you'll ask, and he'll know exactly what to say.

Occasionally, too, you look through your mother's things. Old photo albums of her childhood and her time with your father. There's one of them on a mountaintop, her hair long and windblown, her arms around his neck like she'll never let go. But

he stares at the camera like he's already someplace else.

Other times, you practice going up and down the stairs in your mother's high heels. The red pointy ones. And one day as you rummaged through her clothes, you spotted something balled up in the back of her underwear drawer: the thong, forgotten and unwanted. It's flimsy, like something found in a sales bin. Crayon purple and sparkly. You've seen high school girls wear these things at the mall. Jeans low so the top of the thong shows in the back. The whale tail. Your mother would say thongs are for girls with low self-esteem. But here was one in her underwear drawer, waiting for you like the dollar bills the tooth fairy used to leave under your pillow.

This thing is the holy grail of sex.

Your mother won't even know it's missing.

Friday night horror, Saturday night romance. Though you've seen it a thousand times, cover your eyes and snuggle close to your mother on the sofa when Chucky whacks the babysitter in the face with a hammer.

"She's a goner," your mother says. She throws a piece of popcorn at the TV screen as the babysitter crashes through a window and falls to her death.

Mumsy snores soft and steady in a recliner next to the couch, though occasionally she makes a hacking sound like a cat barfing up a hairball. Giggle when she hacks over a quiet part in the movie. And when she wakes up and says, "What a precious doll," exchange a knowing look with your mother.

Halfway through the movie, Mumsy goes upstairs to bed. Make another bag of popcorn, and beg your mother for a third root beer. When she says no, it'll keep you up all night, tell her you'll only drink half.

"Fine," she says, "but I get the other half."

Pretend you don't know it's a joint she lights after Mumsy's gone. (She wants you to think it's just a cigarette.) After you sit down with the fresh bag of popcorn, watch as she lets the smoke creep out of her mouth, and notice how beautiful she

is. Even without makeup and her hair pulled back in a sloppy ponytail, even in a ratty old Tweedy Bird nightgown, there is a purity about her like an uninhabited island in the middle of the sea.

Long to please her.

But wonder about the thong—about where it came from and why she had it. The only men you recall her ever dating were named Ted and Gary. Or Fred and Larry. Neither lasted more than a month, and she never brought them into the house. Though she takes care of you and pays attention, you're aware of a secret history kept hidden beneath all her beauty. It's a history of pain and love. A history of loss. Tomorrow night tears will run down her face as the two of you watch *Dirty Dancing*.

But tonight, when the mom pulls the little boy away from the burnt Chucky doll and the credits come on, lean into her lap and say something to make her laugh. Know it'll be easy since she's had the joint. As she smiles down at you, in your best grandma voice say, "Oh, my, what a precious doll."

Her laugh is a sound you'd hate to forget. She leans her head back and puts her whole body into it. Know she loves you more than anything in the world.

Next time Frankie comes over, let him touch you.

Wear just the thong and a sleeveless shirt. Wait for him at the kitchen table, where you have a view of the backyard—treeless, flowerless, a square expanse of dull green—through the bay window. It's both incredible and painful to watch Frankie work. He's determined to push the mower in perfect straight lines across the lawn. If a row turns out crooked, he goes back, does it again, until it's just right. Only then does he move on to the next row.

When he enters the kitchen, at first he just stands there near the backdoor and gapes at you. Mosquito bites line his arms and legs, and he brings with him the scent of grass and sweat. Smile at him. And once he comes inside and takes the fifty dollar bill your mother left him, stand up and say, "You can touch it."

At first he just runs a finger along the waistband. Then pulls away as if he's been

burnt.

Say, "Touch more."

"More?" He raises his eyebrows. "Janie, you sure?"

Nod and say, "More."

This isn't something you could do with the guys at school. The only date you've ever been on was earlier this year with a kid who wore a black Led Zeppelin t-shirt with golden wings on the back. His name was Trevor James, the cutest guy in the eighth grade, and you asked him to the movies one Friday night. Suspect he said yes just because he was too polite to say no. Suspect your breasts weren't big enough (you were in between training bra and A cup sizes, how embarrassing). When the next weekend came around and he didn't ask you out, you cried and put a black X over every photograph of him in the yearbook.

Close your eyes as Frankie begins to touch the waistband again. Slowly, he traces around to the little triangle in the back, and now he's standing close, his hand behind you touching just your skin. First soft and hesitant, then his whole hand grips an ass cheek. His hand is warm and clammy, and he breathes hormonally against the top of your head.

"I never had a girlfriend," he says. "I just have my mom."

Say, "This doesn't make me your girlfriend."

"Why not?"

"It just doesn't, Frankie."

His hand twitches against you. "Okay."

Know this isn't love, it's not really even a crush, but in you is a strong desire for attention. For some kind of power. You stand there like that, him holding you, until you shiver. Then pull away.

Again, the guilt on his face. The bulge in his shorts.

"It's okay. You liked it?"

He nods.

Say, "I'll let you do it again next time, long as you don't tell anyone."

"I won't," he says. "Thanks, Janie."

Here's what you really want to know: Are you pretty?

While you watch *The Price is Right* with Mumsy one morning, ask her, "Hey, am I pretty?"

"You can't put a price on pretty, dear," she says.

Later, at dinner, twirl the spaghetti around your fork instead of slurp it, and ask your mother: "Mom, am I pretty?"

From across the table she looks at you, on her face so much pride and concern you want to die. "Of course you are, kiddo," she says. "You're gorgeous."

Feel like a baby. Think of your crooked nose and pimples and that pouch of fat for a stomach. Say, "But not like you."

Don't cry when she laughs and you can see smears of red spaghetti sauce on her teeth. Know it's not an evil laugh. It's meant to relieve you, to say you're insane for thinking you're not as pretty as her.

Say, "I'm serious." Concentrate on twirling your spaghetti. Notice the little bits of parsley in the sauce. "I've never even been kissed, you know."

Your mother goes to respond, but then Mumsy begins to cough. Loud and phlegmy. She drops her fork into her plate of spaghetti, and her face goes red. Your mother stands, ready for action, but she doesn't move further. She only waits. Finally, after one last cough followed by a deep gasp of a breath, Mumsy stops. Your mother sits down, and the two of them go on eating as if you hadn't spoken, as if nothing has happened here. There's even a look of relief on your mother's face, like she's been let off the hook.

And so you say this: "I bet you don't even remember what it's like to be kissed."

Silence, like that brief moment right after the metal upon metal of a car crash.

"Honey," your mother says, but whatever other words she holds, whatever stories she keeps from you, stay inside of her. Her face is filled with sorrow now – sorrow not for herself, but for you.

Slam your fork onto the table. "Well, do you?"

They both look at you, surprised. But just as you feel a hint of satisfaction, Mumsy slams her fork too. Shoves her plate away. "I don't like it either," she says, her voice scratchy from coughing. "Too damn chunky."

Your mother puts a hand over her mouth. Then she laughs. Uncontrollably. She laughs so hard she snorts, and tears roll down her cheeks. Mumsy laughs now too, laughs and coughs.

Embarrassed, get up so fast your chair falls to the ground behind you. Don't pick it up. Don't look at either of them. You're about to cry now, like a pathetic child. Hurry upstairs to your bedroom and slam the door. Hate everything.

Underneath your bed is an old Taylor guitar. At some point when you were little your father gave it to you, but you don't remember this. You've just always known it was yours and that it once belonged to him. It has rusted strings and a few shiny scratches along its body. There is no case – just the guitar, dusty and flat underneath the bed. You sometimes wonder why your father wanted you to have it. Was it unwanted, replaced by something better? Or was it valuable, worthy of family heirloom status?

Lie in bed after your spaghetti outburst, and feel an eeriness when you think of the guitar below you, waiting to be played. It's as if your father himself is under there.

When your mother knocks on your door that night – "Janie? You want to talk?" – pretend to be asleep.

A couple weeks later on a rainy day in July, Mumsy paints your nails sparkly blue, and you imagine this blue navigating the neck of the guitar. The sparkle and shine

of it against the bronze strings. Hurry upstairs and pull the guitar out from underneath the bed. It feels heavy and smooth in your hands. Bring it downstairs and sit Indian style on the floor with it in your lap. Mumsy faces you in her recliner, bottle of nail polish in her hands, and says, "Play me a tune, dear."

The only chord you know is E minor, an easy one that requires just pressing two strings on the second fret. Hold these strings down hard. Even though it hurts your fingers, it's a good kind of hurt. Like after a long day of raking leaves. Probably how Frankie feels after mowing the lawn. Strings pressed, strum with your right hand. At first it sounds muffled – it sounds awful – but press harder, keep strumming, and soon it sounds okay. Something dark and mangled. Mumsy bobs her head to your rhythm and so you play louder and hum a low tune. Close your eyes and feel the vibration of the guitar against your chest. Think of your father on stage. His hands bigger and faster than yours, working the strings like the guitar is an extension of his body.

Your mother doesn't own any of his records. She listens to classical music and things like Celine Dion. But you've googled him and discovered a whole long list of albums. You once listened to a song called "Baby Be Gone." The guitar in this song was electric and sad, and the sound of it pulled everything out of you until you felt empty and abandoned and wondered why in the world anyone would ever want to play the blues.

Stop strumming and open your eyes. Mumsy drops the nail polish onto the floor and claps for you. She smiles and says, "Bravo, dear," but notice a tiredness in her face too. Her eyes droop and seem to have this wet glaze over them. Her hair, though dyed black, is graying at the roots. Her face sags like melting Play-Dough, and you think how when she's gone, it'll just be your mother and you.

The blue polish is still bright on your nails three days later when Frankie mows the lawn. While he's busy, sneak into your mother's bedroom and put on some of her makeup. Go heavy on the eye shadow. Wear the thong and your old summer dress from a year ago, the pink and orange plaid one that's too short for you now. Don't wear a bra under it. Let the girls hang. Look down at your feet, your hairy big toe. Those feet, they must be covered. Find a pair of black high heels in your mother's bedroom. No matter they're a size too big.

Wait for him at the kitchen table. Be a woman and cross your legs.



The TV's on low in the living room, and Mumsy rests on the couch. Her snoring sounds more guttural now, like her lungs are filled with sad songs. It's a hot day in August, the sun relentless on Frankie's shoulders as he mows back and forth in his perfect rows. Know he'll come inside with his white t-shirt soaked, the armpits stained a light brown. As you watch him through a window near the table, notice how he mumbles something to himself while he mows, something that looks like counting. Get up and grab the fifty dollar bill from the counter when you hear the hum of the mower stop. Roll it up in your hand so he can't see it. When he comes inside, say, "Hey, Frankie." Lean against the counter all casual-like.

He wipes sweat from his face with a shirtsleeve and breaths hard. "Hey," he says. For a moment he just stands there in the middle of the kitchen, like he's forgotten whose house he's entered. Then, "Janie, can I have some water?"

Make a sexy face. "Call me Jane."

He squints. "Jane?"

Say, "That's right, honey" – the word "honey" strange and full in your mouth – and get him a glass at the sink. Keep the money folded in your hand.

He gulps the water down, then holds the empty glass out to you. "More?"

Get him more, and then more again.

He stops after he's downed half the third glass. This is when he eyes the counter, the spot where his money usually sits. Keep the money tight in your fist. He sets the glass down and glances all around the room. He even looks up at the ceiling as if maybe your mother glued his money up there. Then, finally, he looks at you.

"Janie, hey, where'd my money go?"

Show him the fifty in your hand. Hold it up, still rolled, near your chest.

"Oh," he says. His forehead crinkles, and he looks concerned, like how Mumsy looks when she loses her glasses.

Grin to let him know this is a game. He doesn't grin back, but something in him at

least seems to relax a little. When he goes to take the money, snatch your hand back. He tries to smile now, but he looks worried too. Know that what you're doing is wrong, and you deserve what's coming.

Hold the money behind your back and ask, "Do you think I'm pretty, Frankie?"

"Uh." He scratches his head. "My mom'll wonder where I am."

"Tell me – am I pretty?"

Feel yourself begin to grow angry. You're driven by a sense of desperation you'll look back on years from now and cringe. Even as it's happening, you're ashamed at what you're doing, and yet you can't stop yourself. Desperation has no filter.

"Frankie. Jesus. Am I pretty or not?"

He nods. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah."

Say, "Good."

Then place the rolled bill between your breasts so it sticks out from the dress. Move closer to him. Now wait, make sure he'll let you, then put your hand on the back of his neck. Feel the clamminess of his skin, his erection against your stomach, and pull his face toward yours. Kiss him hard on the mouth. Use your tongue. The taste of his mouth is like when you chew a piece of gum for too long. Pull back afterwards, but keep one hand on the back of his neck.

For a moment, he almost looks like he liked it.

Then he screams.

"Stop it!" he yells. The old gum smell blasting in your face. "Stop it!" He pushes you away and your hip bumps a counter edge. In the living room, Mumsy begins to clear her throat, woken by Frankie's cries. He turns to go, but then he reaches toward your chest, on his face both fear and determination, and quickly snatches his money from your breasts. Then he is gone out the backdoor. He doesn't even bother to shut it. That door is wide open, and you stand and stare at it for a long time until your mother's high heels begin to hurt your feet and you can feel the summer heat coming in from outside.

Vow to never wear the stupid thong again. Instead, stuff it into the sound hole of your father's guitar underneath your bed. The heart of the guitar. As if your father has engulfed your mother. As if you can bury your parents inside some forgotten chasm.

And six months later, on a cold and windy day in February, sit with your mother in room 415 at the Medical University hospital where Mumsy is a patient. Your mother flips through a *Prevention* magazine, and Mumsy sleeps, her snores all the deeper for the morphine running through her veins, which are bright against chalky skin. You're supposed to be reading about cellular mitosis for biology class, but all you can think is how something so small can go so wrong.

Frankie refused to mow the lawn at your house anymore after what happened. He never told on you, though. The first week he didn't show, your mother thought he probably had a cold. She left money on the counter for him, assuming he'd be by the following week. When he didn't show again, she called his mother and then shrugged when she got off the phone. "Said he doesn't like our yard," she told you, and you shrugged back at her, too embarrassed to tell her what happened.

But now there's a knock on the door, and here's Frankie with his mother, Ms. Conway. She looks old in the eyes, but there's a patience there, too, in how she guides Frankie into the room. It's strange to see him in normal clothes and not sweaty. Ms. Conway explains they just wanted to come pay their respects. The way she says it sounds like Mumsy's already dead.

To your surprise, Frankie sits next to you on the window seat. He seems relaxed, like he's been here before, something in him far wiser than you'll ever be. There are permanent wrinkles on his forehead, and specks of gray hair just above his ears. He doesn't say anything, just picks at his fingers. Notice dried blood along the edges of his nails. Your mother and Ms. Conway whisper across the room near the door. Hear the words "tumor" and "lung." The word "spread" too, which makes you think of butter. The room is filled with dim light and a constant hum, and there is Mumsy's snoring too, and the slow beat of her heart monitor. Watch her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, and consider leaving the room for the cafeteria or bathroom. Because how can you face Frankie? How can you apologize for something you don't fully understand? Think of your father, of what he may be doing right this moment, and of how everything that happens in a person's life—every last little

goddamn thing—makes a difference.

“Hey, Janie?” Frankie asks. Feel something freeze inside of you, scared of what might come next. He just continues to pick his fingers, though, and only says, “I’m sorry about your mumsy.”

Notice the lack of sincerity on his face, the blankness, but know he means well. His words, “your mumsy,” fill you up with every shade of blue imaginable.

Your tears come on sudden and full, just as surprising and foreign to you as a cancer diagnosis. First just little whimpers, then great sobs from a hardened, gray place deep down that has existed in you since before you were born. Since the day your father looked at your pregnant mother and said no.

Cry so hard your mother and Ms. Conway come rushing over. Their hands are on you now, Frankie’s too, and even Musmy begins to stir. “Is the baby crying?” she asks, and you cry harder. Because there are some hurts that cannot be comforted. Not even by your mother. No amount of hands or hugs or love in the world can penetrate the brokenness you feel. It’s a brokenness—a heartache—that at some point you just have to embrace. You have to learn how to play the blues. Only then, when you feel all there is to feel, can you stop crying. Only then can you finally take what you’ve been given.

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# THE FACTS I LEARNED

Michelle Donahue

His blood, like our salmon, left quickly. First came the initial thermal shock from his nuclear plant—that bloom of heat dispersing into the once cold depths of ocean. Then the salmon bodies piled on the shore. They couldn't escape fast enough. At first it was like a gift, such wealth. But we all knew, we must have, that this meant deprivation later.

It went like this—my kitchen knife, good, hard, stainless steel—slid into his neck. The blade found his jugular.

Even when the salmon formed mountains on the shores, I couldn't have guessed how bad it would be. Fishing, the fuel of our town's economy, in one move obliterated. But we'd been told the new plant would bring jobs, and it did. Jobs and thermal discharge, water laced with heavy metals, trace uranium, who knows what else.

**Fact:** Ghosts are about power. They arise when the dead individual just can't take it. Power persists even after death.

His blood pooled on my kitchen tile. This wasn't the way I expected the night to go. I'd always been just a little too impulsive. I'd invited him—James DeWitt, owner of the plant—over for dinner on an impulse. That was how our small town worked. You were friendly, you invited everyone over for dinner at some point. I thought if he could just sit down and talk to someone, a real human, he might have some sympathy.

I knew it was naive, but our economy had already imploded and rebuilt around the single nuclear plant. What else to do?

A knife to the jugular was an option I hadn't considered. Oh, I had fantasized about killing him, but that was the stuff of dreams, lived in half-consciousness. But when I met him, he was all villain. I couldn't believe it. When he was in my house, when he was telling me they followed all the safety precautions, when I told him he was

hurting the environment, was killing children—

He stood, pushed me against the wall, my wall, in my own house. I wondered if he knew I was working on a lawsuit, was gathering all the medical data I could. He held both my shoulders and whispered in my ear.

“I will ravage you.” He placed his arm on my chest to hold me, to free one hand, which ran down my body, under the hem of my dress, “You’re so powerless.”

I stabbed him. The knife was so convenient on the kitchen counter.

Panic. Like someone had taken a saw to my body, torn me in two, so my body divided to aching pieces. My fingertips tingled, wet and slick from the blood. Working at the hospital, I saw blood frequently, but I’d never felt it like this on my hands. Thick. I washed and washed my hands as I looked out the window to the distant ocean. I scrubbed, the blood diluting pink.

My mind raced with how to dispose the body (or turn myself in?). What next to do?

But when the blood stopped flowing, the body vanished, each particle blinking from existence. How strange, I thought. How easy it is to disappear.

But in the empty space created by the body, a cloud formed, thicker than mist, less dense than cotton.

I ran.

**Fact:** Darkness confuses ghosts. It diffuses them, so they drift far away from their targets. The darkness splits them to pieces; in it, they almost lose themselves. If you walk fast during the day, you can sleep at night and almost always, you’ll outrun your ghost.

I stood, silent in the redwoods. Put my palm to that lucent, red flesh, soft and fire scarred. Amazing, how the base of these creatures so often burns, carves out the flesh, leaves a crevice, permanent black. The base can die, but the tree still lives. The bark won’t rot, will still support the rest as it grows.

This was the night Abe came to us, scared and pursued. He still had a knife in his

hand when he joined us. He tossed it on the ground, and there was blood on it, ripe and hot. Did I imagine I could see the heat still rising from it? Or was it a trick of the eye? Some cloudy remnant of his new ghost?

I wasn't the only one being chased, though I was one of the first.

Something had made us violent. The pollution, the thermal shock of our waters? Or just desperation. We were a rag-tag group, young and old, ghost refugees, always on the run. We had all killed, in self-defense, half-accidents, deliberate murder. Or like me, a sweep of impulsive violence.

Abe was young, only nineteen. We felt his presence before he arrived. It's always like that. This pull toward a place, a prediction a killing will happen before it does.

That's how we gathered, how we found one another.

"What happened?" Edward asked Abe. In a circle, all of us, maybe twenty or so. So many I had lost track.

Abe said nothing, eyes on hands. I remembered how it took months for my hands to feel clean again.

"Don't press him," I said

"Whatever you say," Edward said, adjusting his hat, giving me a mean eye. Edward was ancient, at least eighty, and he begrudged my leadership. Or maybe he was just grumpy. He pulled on his tinfoil hat again.

We were being chased by ghosts and he was worried about aliens probing his thoughts.

Our newer members, those who had been running for a year or less, were still sound of mind. But I was the only old member who still had all of my faculties. I hadn't yet lost my grip. I wondered why I hadn't lost it. Could think of no reasons.

**Fact:** People come back as ghosts because they're afraid of the place they'll go next.

The redwoods burned and we kept running. Redwoods fell, as any unpreserved land was clear-cut. Slim smoke tunnels replaced trees. We ran deeper into the woods, taking refuge in the shade, resting only in the dark, out in the wild, where our ghosts most easily lost us.

"How long have you been running?" Abe asked one night. He wouldn't talk to anyone but me, but I didn't ask why.

"Three years. I was one of the first." And though I couldn't quite tell because of the dark, it seemed like he nodded. Many knew my story. The disappearance of DeWitt made some news. Coupled with my own vanishing, there were rumors. If only it had made a difference. But one of DeWitt's sons took over the nuclear plant. My home was the same as it was. Probably worse.

"Who do you miss?" Abe asked.

It was hard to pinpoint individuals. I had spent so much time at the small hospital that I had forgotten what existed beyond work. I had no husband, no children, a father who had died young, a mother forgetting her existence thanks to Alzheimers. But I missed the town, the small community of mostly good people. There were good people here too, running, losing themselves slowly.

"Will I go crazy, like the others?" Abe asked.

"Probably."

"But you haven't?"

**Fact:** Ghosts are like rabid animals. Wild, acting on pure instinct, on disease. Though they slowly forget their former lives, still they pursue their killers.

One night, when the moonlight glared bright, the ghosts' half-forms whispered to us. Echoes from a once-solid form. I could feel DeWitt around me, a fierce, probing energy. In his last minutes of life, he thought he was powerful enough to enter inside me. When I closed my eyes, sometimes I could feel it. A phantom memory of what never happened.

The full moon was the worst. There was no running from it. Only hoping.



The last full moon they got Muriel. She had been with us for years, was perhaps the most gone, already. She talked to everything inanimate. Held long conversations with dirt, with the silvered bark of trees.

In the light, with thoughts of death, I touched Abe. He had red hair like DeWitt, only his face was much kinder. I pinned him hard against a redwood, one of the older ones. We were screaming distance away from the others, but out of sight. With my palm pressed to it, the dry hull of bark skimmed my fingertips. This too, was scarred. These trees needed fire to live, for their seeds to burst. Fire that killed the old parts of them.

I pinned him to the tree to feel solid. I kissed his neck, so salty from a constant sheen of salt-slicked fear.

"Yes?" I asked. He was so much younger, I wanted to make sure.

"Yes."

I rubbed my hands down his chest, his body so thin I easily found that flat bone disk of his manubrium. Traced the outward curve to his ribs, pressed into the valleys, that intercoastal space between his bones. I lifted the hem of his shirt, revealed inch by inch the skin. He swept off my shirt in one quick pull, but hesitated at the bra clasp.

I guided him into the tree, inside the old redwood that already had outlived us. I pushed him into the darkness inside the hollow, the safety that comes from a lack of sight. I unclasped my bra.

In the dark I felt dissolved. I longed to map him, every rib, precise curve, the sternum's rough edge. I could name every bone in his body, but I still felt like I couldn't know him.

I ran my tongue across his palate, bit his lip, a breath away from drawing blood. We clung, dug our claws into each other, covered our skin in grit.

**Fact:** Only a certain sort of person can return as a ghost. They must be truly evil or determined, sometimes both.

Close to the river mouth of my home, Edward left us. The heat rose from the river as visible clouds. There was no heat left in his body, face-down, half in, half out of the slow river. His tinfoil hat had washed away, gathering somewhere in the ocean.

When I found him, his was the only visible body left in the river. Perhaps microbes still existed there, but to my naked eye there was no life.

**Fact:** A ghost is an image, but also a feeling. It finds you slowly, turns you cold, and then slowly attacks.

As I arched into Abe, I named his strong deltoid muscle, triangular, rounded between the shoulder and outer arm. Attached to that bladed scapula of the shoulder, moving like wings. I imagined peeling back his skin, touching each muscle of his body.

Palm to clavicle, I used the collarbone for leverage. I always thought anatomical terms carried a weight to them. I gasped. Deloit from Greek deltoids shaped like a river delta. The land formed at the river's mouth. Our mouths met, heavy. It felt suffocating. Rivers carry sediment and deposit it in the delta, the place between. River and ocean, estuary, lake. As he sunk between me, I counted and mapped.

My hands found his hard, elephant-eared pelvis. The protrusion of hipbones beneath taut skin. Three fused bones forming his cupped cavity, his socketed hip joint. Before me: bones comforted by cartilage as he slid back and forth, forth, back.

On his back I traced each vertebrae. The telltale plummet of the spine. I spine-tapped, determining just where I could plunge a needle for a lumbar puncture. I collected that fluid and analyzed.

**Fact:** A ghost is only a memory, a tangible representation of fear.

Each full moon we lost another. As the rivers grew warmer, our group grew smaller. I found Beatrice with a tree limb through her body. She had begun to

believe that the trees were people, could save her from ghosts.

We ran faster. Abe's young, tireless limbs pushed me on stronger.

I felt too full of motion. Like my particles were moving too fast.

We ran in circles. When we arrived close to my old town, it was empty, each house still there, but cold. The plant still released heat, thick clouds of it, but I couldn't see anyone. Were they hidden inside its gates? Existing only indoors under phosphorescent lights?

**Fact:** Ghosts fixate on one single purpose until it absorbs them, becomes them.

In the dark, I saw the map of Abe's body, his skeleton delicately housed in muscle and skin. Each night, I would take a scalpel to him, form a line—clavicle to groin—and peel back his skin.

The night was misty, clouds of formless substance floating. I breathed it into my lungs.

I plunged my hands into him, felt his endless warmth. I peeked inside him, to better know him, to understand myself.

There is no darkness like the dark inside a body. I crawled in. Inside him, I would be safe. Inside him, we became each other.

**Fact:** Ghosts have no sense of time and little sense of self.

Fire. Bright brilliant fractures, like shards of stained glass. I remembered only the darkness inside Abe, and then this pure light. The redwoods burning, all creatures fleeing from the heat.

I was so hot. And Abe? I could no longer feel him.

I ran and ran until I dissolved.

I had been curled and safe inside him, and then there were no walls so tightly around me. I stood, and I was back in my empty house, in my stark kitchen light. I thought, this is what madness is. How strange to finally know.

My body on the floor. No sign of blood, only stillness. I felt a terrible cold as I looked down at myself. How beautiful I was, skin pale and peaceful.

I tried to remember how I got here. To piece together what I knew and what I didn't.

I thought I knew the story, had just told myself again, again its pieces. It went like this.

I remember killing DeWitt, but also the feel of him inside me.

I remember the endless running, but also being motionless.

I remember Abe, each bone vivid.

I remember ghosts, heavy metal, redwoods in flame.

I remember the hot, thick feeling of blood on my hands. How I washed them and watched the ocean outside my window. The water ran up my arms, swept me into its heat, a rush. Wet skin, salmon swimming past.

As the salmon piled on shore, my pink body was left gasping salt.

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# A GIVING TOILET

Marcus Pactor

Gabriel descended the stairs and presented me a bowl full of his teeth. He lisped the number of dollars he expected from the Tooth Fairy. I helped him rinse out his mouth, then returned him to bed, medicated Lila, and soothed the woken daughter. The next morning Gabriel counted his money but could not gloat. Staff doctors at the hospital turned us over to the distinguished resident from Bombay. He read Gabriel's x-rays and declared our son's voice box gone. "Poof," he said, clapping and turning his palms up to the light. We were not amused. The resident explained that such things happened sometimes in the woods, less often here.

The resident sent us home after a week of fruitless tests and samplings. He asked to be kept informed. An article could be published, a documentary could be made.

In the downstairs bathroom that evening, old scratches in the toilet's base turned into cracks, those cracks turned into deltas, and water ran through my socks.

I never told my family that, before I installed the new toilet, a golden spider had clambered from the air vent. Lila would have looked at me foul if she knew I had not bagged it alive for money but instead ground it into the tile. I swept the goop and fragments into the brown hole which led, I figured, to a landfill or ocean or limbo. Then I set the wax and leveled the toilet and bolted it down over the portal. I hacksawed the bolts' rough ends and caulked the toilet's base and attached the water cable and opened the valve. The liquid treble feedback sound of the bowl filling reminded me of TV news anchors interrupting my dreams. After some time Gabriel fetched me to eat. I forgot to test the flush.

Lila baptized the toilet after lunch. The children were banging pots and I was rinsing dishes when a moan grew louder and louder beneath the house, followed by a pop in the bathroom. Lila squealed.

Gabriel ran in while I scooped up the baby. Our family together surveyed a toy duck, preserved in shrink wrap, floating on its side in the bowl. I washed the find in the sink and sliced it free with a box cutter. I massaged and sniffed it. No excretory residue adhered to it. Then Lila tested it with close-up eyes and hard sniffs and

hot-potato hands before agreeing that it posed no harm. Now, the daughter was of smiling age but did not smile often. She ignored my best goo-goo faces and sounds. She giggled, though, when Gabriel squeezed and flew the duck at her nose.

In the living room the children continued their play while Lila cuddled me on the couch. She had the tenderness of a noodle, though I never said so aloud. She would think I considered her bland or plain when I meant nothing so untoward. She would ask me if I thought I was the marital sauce. But the word “noodle” simply came to mind whenever she touched my heart. Later I touched the crown of the toilet. Later still I touched the forehead of my sleeping son and hoped.

[NIGHT]

During night feedings I often sang mindless songs or whispered tall tales to the daughter. We rocked in a chair belonging to Lila’s dead uncle. The deceased had given us a great deal, though he failed to leave us money. And he loaned rather than gave, I felt, no matter what he or Lila said. The story was complicated and despised. He had not been long removed from us, three or four months.

In this near privacy I thought of the nurse whose hand grazed mine at the hospital’s commissary, reaching across me for a blueberry muffin. I had never touched a nurse so white and fat. In the cradle of my arm the daughter slept and sucked. She could not express much. She had not hit many of the benchmarks listed in Lila’s books and articles. I sang of a princess who turned into a fish, then a tiger, then a bird which flew beyond the mountains. Afterward I described the mountains’ wondrous shapes. I detailed their icy tops.

The portal might have been opened by the noon sun’s height, the composition of our meal, or an elf’s caprice. In spite of regular lever-pulling, it did not open again for days. My hope waned until another moan and pop applauded Gabriel’s flush. He came out beckoning like a happy dog. He led us back to a necklace of blue diamonds, again in shrink wrap, moving in the bowl. I cut it free and trusted it to my son, who offered it to his mother. Lila sniffed it and let her young gentleman clasp it round her neck. He smiled rosy gums and broken roots. The diamonds shined like crumbles of sky.

She wore the necklace that afternoon to the city’s most neglected park. There

grass grew from rocks and rocks grew from grass. Trees slumped more than grew on a line to the east. The basketball goal had neither backboard nor hoop. Puddles had the haze and glow of motor oil. Ducks flapped noise on the womb-shaped pond. At the water's edge, frogs gathered round a bike tire. Its upper half cooked in daylight, its lower half waved like a ribbon on the water. Somehow the sun made wonder of all that earth. I pushed the family on the big spinner colored with graffiti. They rode with open, laughing mouths, though Gabriel of course could not laugh.

Older children advanced from the court. I worried over the necklace, but they were drawn and charmed by Gabriel's silence. They made him a crown of grass. They built an altar of brush and brought him a frog and sharpened stick, but he waved off their plan, and they were amazed by his mercy. He tossed the stick forty yards end over end. It landed spike down on an anthill. A glory floated about and through him.

I watched from the tree line, where I had followed the women. The daughter crawled over the roots of a dead oak. Lila tugged my shirt and said that I must flush the toilet after lunch tomorrow.

[NIGHT]

In the dead uncle's chair, rocking easily for any and all to see, I felt songless. The daughter's mouth hardly moved on the bottle, though she groaned whenever I pulled it back. The longer she took, the more I soured. I could never sleep after her leisurely drink sessions.

The uncle had bought this rocker and the baby's crib and dresser. He had bought most of Gabriel's furniture as well as the living room couch and the lamps scattered across the house. He would not let me slip him twenty bucks here or a hundred bucks there. Sometimes, though, he let me wire a fan or replace a rotten board on his property. On breaks I looked in vain for signs of company: a razor in the shower, a tampon in the trash can. He could not tell a screw from a screwdriver. He had more liver spots than real teeth at his passing.

I relayed these dumb facts to the child.

Then I turned inward, to the nurse. Her blond hair. Her berry-flavored kiss. Her smothering white fat smothering me.

But no one chose a random nurse over a son with a vanished voice box and a girl so young and a wife unless he had one cheap heart.

But couldn't I indulge a dream?

Say a man stops at a hospital's commissary for lunch. The moment he tongs a lukewarm chicken thigh, he spots a nurse paying for her tray of slop. Later he brings her a muffin. And so on. Should have skipped to the so on.

A song came to me. I declined to share it with the girl.

[NIGHT]

Gabriel slept fine. I watched his back inflate and deflate. The toy duck stood guard atop the bed's mantle. It had nailhead eyes. The tooth money was crumpled in a bowl beside it, the same bowl Gabriel had used to deliver his teeth, and beside the money lay the crown of grass. The bowl had been a mainstay of blackjack games between him and the uncle. No talking was allowed. They would tap a card to hit and wave a hand to stay. They played for pennies and whenever Gabriel won he dropped his spoils into the bowl. He stirred those pennies with his hand, making a sound like rain.

Gabriel must have learned something from their otherwise quiet play. He had not saddened once over his losses and in fact enjoyed pointing at what he wanted of the world. And he did not want much beyond, apparently, his sister's duck. I touched the money. Then Lila entered, stroked my arm, and pushed her modest chest against mine.

[NIGHT]

She rolled from me to the open window and faded from coitus to dream. I sat up, filmy in the crotch and bitter atop the covers. At the climax the nurse had filled my mind.

Now I wondered what the golden spider's bite could do. Its venom might transmute guts into gold. Then noodle and children and mortician and nurse would tear at me with forks and knives. They would set the golden muscles and



bones on the prospector's scale. I retain—even now—a low opinion of justice.

The uncle seemed to make money from air. But he was less alchemist than diviner, as he had seen before almost anyone the importance of floppy discs and, later, their obsolescence. Yet he had seen little of the world. Its weather and landscapes and cultures did not stir him. He played cards. He called and took calls from his broker, Tom. He went barefoot through our house on many summer days. The daughter, like him, had large gaps between her toes and dulling brown eyes. My wife said to forget the debts. And he had, to repeat myself, said that money did not matter. But on his last Valentine's Day, I pulled him into the garage to show off a pair of earrings. He asked me what I knew of thrift. I did not ask him what he knew of women.

I excused myself from the table before biting once into my roast beef sandwich. The family came with me to the bathroom door, smiled as I closed it on them. They joined me after my flush. Soon a moan and pop brought a green thong from below. It moved unwrapped and free as seaweed atop the refilling bowl. It could not have fit around Lila's hips. It could not have been a voice box in Gabriel's throat. We watched incoming water carry it around the bowl until it floated dead before us, and a monogrammed "B" on the crotch became legible. It was outlined in blue sequins. I could not deny that this thong was made for someone elsewhere.

Gabriel fished it out and made a dripping pendulum of it. My daughter splashed the forming puddle. Lila conveyed several unpleasantries to me. "What?" I said. She went upstairs.

The children and I returned to the table. Before the occurrence, Gabriel had been slurping milk-soggy chocolate cereal. He would continue a soft food diet for another week, when his dentures would be ready. At other meals he ate strawberry ice cream and, less often, his sister's jars of pureed fruit. He would not try the jelly given us by the distinguished resident from Bombay. That mixture of vitamins and herbs and elephant shavings was favored by some villagers from the woods of Chota Nagpur. The doctor claimed its heartiest devotees survived well past their centennials, but Gabriel had not listened past the word "shavings." I could not blame him. The mixture smelled like a zoo cage left unattended for several summer days. I raised my sandwich level with my mouth when Gabriel set the thong on the table. I told him to put it in the trash. He dipped it in his bowl, waistband first, as though he was releasing a fish into a pond. Then he swirled it in the milk till the crotch flattened and spread over the surface. I dumped the bowl's

contents into the sink and switched on the garbage disposal. Its blades chopped at the thong. They failed to eat it.

I poured him a second bowl of cereal. Gabriel let it soften, then ate it without complaint. The daughter painted her tray with milk and pureed peas. Cabinet doors vibrated. The refrigerator hum sounded male and soothing. My stomach seemed to fold over my bladder. I took the children to the living room and overturned a bin of toys. They crashed and rattled till Lila came back. She wanted to take her kids for a ride.

I unscrewed the bathroom's air vent and gloved my hands and drew from the duct a morning's worth of Cheerios, gauzy sheets of webbing, and three golden eggs like misshapen marbles, all of which I flushed.

Then I stretched the thong across the pit of the sink. It smelled like chocolate milk and disposal bottom. The "B" looked ripped by a gator's claw. I considered working it further with the box cutter and tossing the shreds into a neighbor's back yard, then taking the family out for barbecue.

Instead I replaced the air vent and returned to the table. At last I would eat what I could of my sandwich. I set aside hardened bread and wilted lettuce and faded tomato and chewed the softer slices of meat, still flavorful with veggies and creole mustard. The cabinets had not quit their vibrations but they bothered me less now. The thong lay over my knee, letter down, G-string twirled. I would have liked the thong in better condition and the dead uncle alive. I would have liked the uncle across from me, eating a sandwich of his own. I would have given him the thong to sniff.

Under the last slice of roast beef I found a golden egg. I washed it and the leftover sandwich down the drain. I rinsed the other dishes, loaded the washer, hid in the master bathroom, and found a second egg in my pocket. I sent it down the bathtub drain. I showered till I heard the ticking of legs in the drain grow louder.

But I felt easier and more certain after I dressed. I waited in bed for the last egg to reveal itself and hatch, for the newborn spider to bite into my calf. Later I woke to pressurized quiet. My ears felt encased in plastic shells. I did not budge. An idea remained from my dream to call the daughter by name. She had not yet had a chance to flush the toilet. My family would gather round. I would help her press the lever. The moan and pop would deliver us the necessary gift at last. I would wire the new box to my son's throat. Gabriel would beg in his old voice for ice

cream. Lila would push her breasts against me, and they would be enough. The daughter, too, would know the weight and value of my heart.

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Marcus Pactor wrote the short story collection, [Vs. Death Noises](#). His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The EEEL*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Literary Orphans*. He lives and works in Jacksonville, Florida.

# POEM + INTERVIEW WITH JOHN RUFO

CA Conrad

CA Conrad writes poems / is a poet / is also a poem.

CA Conrad doesn't put up with bullshit.

CA Conrad speaks out and loves.

CA Conrad spies beautiful animals and works through the becoming-animal.

CA Conrad takes on Walt Whitman, sleeps in the Walmart parking lot.

CA Conrad CAN AND WILL WRITE IN ALL-CAPS. CA Conrad communicates.

His newest work is *WIDTH OF A WITCH*.

This series of poems is in correspondence with the planets.

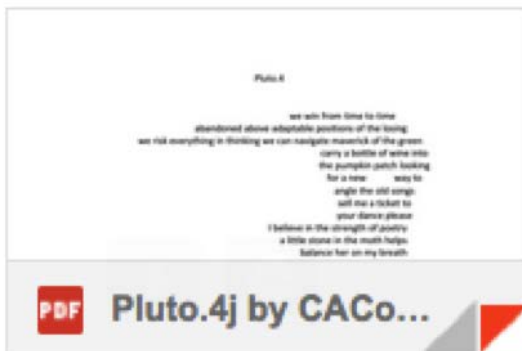
A new poem, Pluto.4, printed below, is the last poem in this series.



**CA Conrad**

to me

So sorry I'm behind.  
Please send me questions, that is a great idea.  
Thank you John, I'm excited about doing this with you.  
Thank you so much!  
All my very best, CA  
p.s. attaching a new tiny poem



Pluto.4

we win from time to time  
abandoned above adaptable positions of the losing  
we risk everything in thinking we can navigate maverick of the green  
carry a bottle of wine into  
the pumpkin patch looking  
for a new way to  
angle the old songs  
sell me a ticket to  
your dance please  
I believe in the strength of poetry  
a little stone in the moth helps  
balance her on my breath

**CA Conrad:** Hi, did you send questions yet?

**John Rufo:** Here are the questions, below!! This is my first question:

Your (Soma)tic rituals are invested in the individual practice ... i.e., "I go out into the world and perform this action / become involved in an interplay that manifests (sometimes) in a poem."

But how much, too, is a third party – an audience – involved in the practice?

I'm thinking about when you perform your poems vs. the writing of them. Is the performance also a ritual? Lucas de Lima and I recently talked about ritualizing in terms of his garb for performance / this is a way of making a reading into a ritual.

Do you feel as though your readings have the capacity for ritual? And is that similar to the exercise?

**CA Conrad:** There is a long ritual I have been doing for 9 years. On the 3rd anniversary of the invasion of Iraq I stopped cutting my hair and each morning I look at the latest body counts in our wars. Plural, wars. We are bombing people in Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan at this point. It is so depressing the amount of suffering, suffering with real live human beings — that I had to start doing interactive performance art rituals. I needed to speak to the public.

Yes, they are always part of it now. "Resurrect Extinct Vibration" is a new long piece I am working on where I lie on the ground all across the United States and listen to the field recordings of extinct animals. According to the World Wildlife Fund we have lost 52% of all wild animals in the past 40 years. This was also very depressing and I decided to do a ritual where I interact with bees, living creatures.

The bees are also now part of the ritual for that piece. And performance as ritual is also important and Lucas is extraordinary. His poems are amazing and his delivery, the ritual of the delivery is making poetry seen that no one will ever forget.

My rituals involve getting ready to perform. I eat lots of dark chocolate for one thing, which gets me ready to read everything I need to read and not falter in that task. I trained my voice so that I know my vocal range and I score the poems to keep track of how and when to alter my tone, pitch, etc. Glitter is very important to me.

**John Rufo:** So that the ritual is a method of making space / making ready for the performance.

I have another question about space, and I think it directly communicates with Pluto.4, your poem provided above.

The way your poems are typically organized / how they move down the page / becomes a way of CENTERING at the same time as DE-CENTERING – i.e., they are center-aligned, sometimes, but they also jut out left and right. They write at the same time as they dance / they orbit a middle while also breaking away and off that orbit.

Does the structure of your poems depend on this wobble? Is this a kind of queerness?

**CA Conrad:** Starting with the very first of the (Soma)tics, I allowed the poems to direct themselves on the page. I would say it is intuitive, but what I really mean is I am listening to them, the poems, and how they should weigh on the paper. The shapes are completely up to the poems themselves.

Queerness though? Yes. Yes – in that my being queer made me exactly who I am as a poet and I honor that and always will.

**John Rufo:** How the poems communicate in their intuitive states and structures go beyond their individual modes, too. In that you write in series, you conduct various attempts and successes along a path. It is plural, it is a continuum.

Your poems in the past year about Earth have been especially moving and striking to me, not just by themselves, but because you seem to be involved in a constant practice of working through this / these experience(s).

Is each poem part of the working through? Or, similar to what you say in terms of ritual for performance, does each one make space for the next ritual if they do not entirely succeed?

**CA Conrad:** There were three rituals for Earth because it was extremely difficult and one was simply not enough. Or maybe the right one wasn't until the third one – is what I think I really mean to say. But yet each of the rituals and resulting poems helped in their own ways. The third one was an amazing and powerful shift in my life. I am a completely different person now as a result of the third one.

**John Rufo:** So not only making poetry that no one will forget, but making poetry that changes the poet. The ritual and the poetry and the poet all metamorphosing one another.

"Poetry and Ritual," one of your newer works, is an essay in lines. I LOVE that it is an essay, because it wants a conversation – it wants an ars poetica to be known clearly / but also demands to be read, in lines, as a poem itself.

Does the essay / poem distinction matter to you / does it simply mutter / is it a mother / is it twin-ed?

**CA Conrad:** "Poetry & Ritual" is for you to decide if it is a poem, an essay, or both. The queerness lies in that very question. Queerness as in walking on both sides, male and female and at different times more one or the other. Queerness is not gay and lesbian because gay and lesbian is very defined, more rigid in my opinion. Queerness is truly allowing the continuum its full range.

When I meet men in particular who get offended if someone refers to them as female, that man is NOT queer. Queerness fights misogyny, racism, classism, nationalism, the military, queerness is all about being the one willing to not be defined and to not be accepting of the road we are on politically, environmentally, etc. We are not doing well as a species because the structures we continue to turn

to over and over keep breaking us into the same broken pieces. Radical changes are absolutely necessary now. Creativity is essential in finding the ways to be FREE from former structures of living, communicating, and how we treat the future of this planet.

Judy Grahn's book *ANOTHER MOTHER TONGUE* is a nice start for young queers to get a glimpse of queerness in ancient Europe before the church colonized everyone. Queers were honored for our ease in the continuum.

**John Rufo:** Below, a post of yours I love. Thank you for taking time to talk about the world.



**CAConrad** @CAConrad88 · Aug 26

i had THE MOST extraordinary  
half hour with a butterfly  
i need to take more time to talk about the  
world with bugs



6



34



CAConrad's childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He is the author of eight books of poetry and essays, the latest *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Wave Books) is the winner of the 2015 Believer Magazine Book Award. He is a 2015 Headlands Art Fellow, and has also received fellowships from Lannan Foundation, MacDowell Colony, Banff, Ucross, RADAR, and the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage; he conducts workshops on (Soma)tastic Poetry and Ecopoetics. Visit him online at <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com>

John Rufo is a poet-critic currently working on two poetry manuscripts, various critical pieces, and a book of conversations with contemporary poets regarding race, gender, sexuality, and disability. He will earn his B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies (an interwoven critical mass/mess emphasizing poetics, creative writing, philosophy, history, film, postcolonial theory, Asian/American studies, queer identity/theory, and blackness) this spring from Hamilton College, where he also received a Senior Fellowship for independent thesis study. Next fall, he will begin graduate study in English literature. You can find him online at [dadtalkshow.tumblr.com](http://dadtalkshow.tumblr.com)



# THREE POEMS

Sophia Terazawa

## GIVING ORAL

November loves you, but we don't need your money.

Oh, Ziprasidone, keep us away.

He gave me a bear, and I named it Ginger.

Stay with me now.

November loves you, but an exorcism is not covered by our insurance.

Try again. What is the last thing you remember?

He gave me a bear, and I named it Ginger.

Wait.

I remember being the "first Asian," and I remember because he said I was his "first Asian," and I think at the time it was supposed to make me feel special.

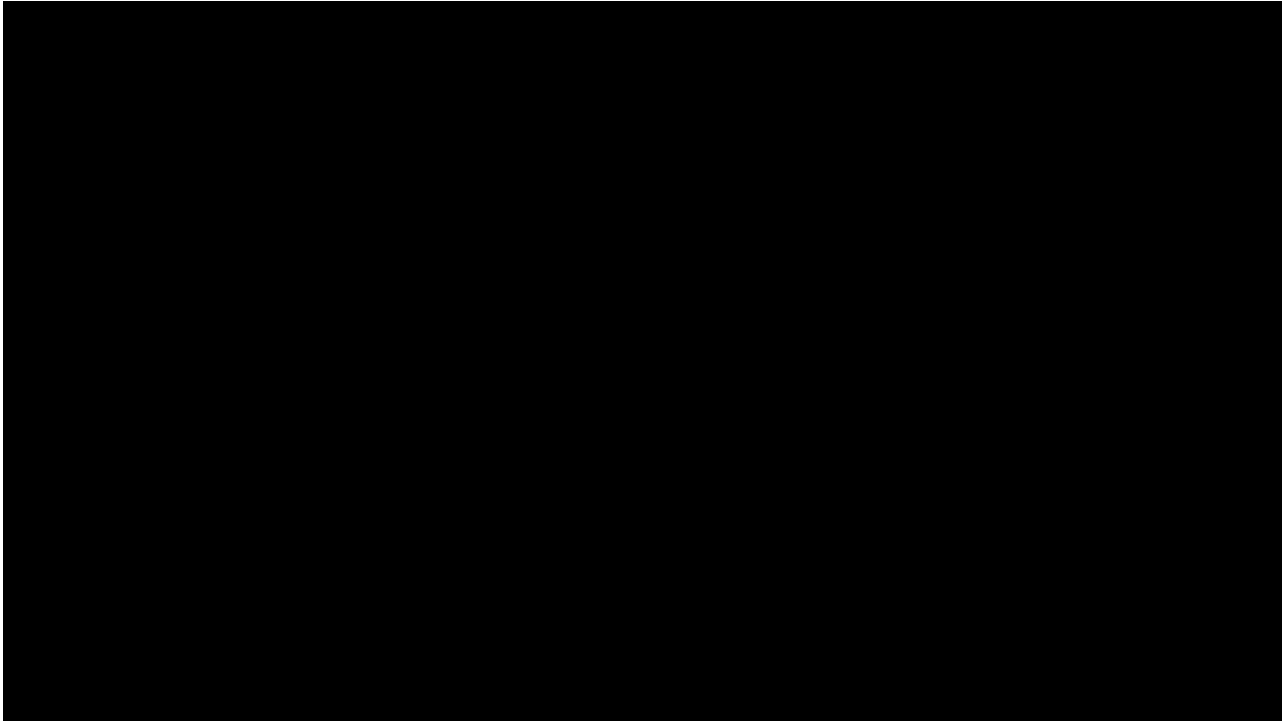
Try again.

My legs were like a double helix. I unraveled in the mouth, and in the movie EX MACHINA, Kyoko failed to reap her body, and in my body I stored the code, the code of obedience, tonguing, and racist imagination, but I suppose this is not covered by our health insurance, too.

Try again.

How do you say this in your language?

“Gari” is the Japanese word for a young ginger that has been sliced and marinated. After the pickling process, gari takes on a light pink hue, like the inside of a cunt or the peeled human flesh of Nagasaki in 1945. Take your pick.



## MENSTRUATING IN AMERICA

Armadillo in fifth grade sex-ed  
the lone star and Alamo, Kotex

what little house on the prairie  
what Davy Crockett bounty

Derek Brown said I was damned  
since angels did not look like me

what should I do to get into heaven  
what lighter hair dye should we try

and when I finally get my period  
should I hide the cursed color too

it's a lie when you say that all girls  
bleed the same because in America

we are all not fucked the same  
when there are this many slurs

for a body in exile and perhaps  
Derek thought I was a fallen angel

so decisively American so girl so  
yellow so identifiably not-white

so blue like the mystery liquid  
dribbled upon a sanitary pad

to show how we all cycle in little  
covert ways but that is a lie too

if my pelvis was a sieve would it  
crack when I hit the desert running

would it go down in McGraw-Hill  
as the comet that took out Austin

and would my scalp be captioned  
a streak of ash in the saddle ranch sky

I don't know how to tell you  
but we were this close to flying

and I let you go so it would not hurt  
to split that close at hand

take my spirit take it take...  
I was the fistful of stars called my legs

and we were the fits of rage no one could see

but here we leapt like suns in motion

don't I have the right to combust

don't I have the right to bleed

## GIVING HEAD

Yellow rose like a bonfire or the Tale of Genji,  
its spine two inches thick, a string of carnations,  
men in the woods making fairy tales out of deer,  
their heads on spikes, eyes black like mine...

Try again.

Here is my ribcage, and here is the twig running through it.  
If you step here, the chest will invert, and out will rise  
a shackled, leathery thing, this beast who carries my face,  
marked with coal and a crown of bones, unfurls its wings.

Expose. Intend to kill.

Wait.

Isn't this what you wanted? Oh, I misunderstood.

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Sophia Terazawa is the author of *I AM NOT A WAR*, winner of the 2015 Essay Press Chapbook contest. As a Vietnamese-Japanese poet and performer working with ghosts, her work (text, film, music, dance, etc.) have been featured in places like *The James Franco Review*, *Project As[I]Am*, *The Fem*, *HYSTERIA*, *Apogee Journal* (*Perigee*), and elsewhere. Currently, she is a columnist for *THE DECOLONIZER*, where she writes about love and intimacy as radical healing practice. Please visit her website at [www.sophiaterazawa.com](http://www.sophiaterazawa.com)

# FROM 'POPPYCOCK & ASSPHODEL'

Cody-Rose Clevidence

I demean the parade  
 of stars ] I supine  
 the cedar  
 & firs  
 I masochist  
 the "dawn" &  
 the "dew" I callous  
 the ordinary  
 bloom  
 in daylight I show  
 my face 2 the face  
 of the sun, (in more  
 ways than one)  
 I break as the  
 "crest" of a "wave"  
 in eyelet or silence  
 or come, "crest  
 fallen" in cocks-comb  
 or plume, I make  
 a pasture climb  
 2 th sky  
 w my eye,  
 stroke "thigh"  
 or rhyme "I"  
 with "my"  
 I hereby condemn  
 any solemn  
 moment  
  
 its pollen  
 or spume

I harvest a meadow

of larks, laugh  
 w th laughter  
 of doves  
 wring drip  
 after drip  
 “just th’  
 tip” of a star,  
 ther, ask  
 a question  
 in th’ form  
 of an answer  
 form of a gather  
 or an after  
 -thought, thought-  
 less, caught  
 a ruby-throated hum  
 from th’ sword-fights  
 of noon, the lazy  
 sword-fights of summer  
 of haze or lovers  
 dazed, or odor  
 of vowels, sprung  
 forth & faster,  
 faster & O  
 timid,  
 timid is the  
 flatulence of stars.

o dude of all o daffodil  
 o dude of a daffodil of sprung  
 a bolt of reason might  
 hold-up (unlikely) against a trumpet, not  
 poised, unpoised, be milked thy milky  
 way of trumpets, thy milky  
 way of aster, thy milky eye  
 w it’s ooze on its sleaze on  
 it’s griefs of, & pollen,  
 get down on yr knees of,  
 shock of grass in th fist of

(if only) a thought could rise  
like th sun, forgetting  
its early plum—

th' early urge 2  
rage, th' plundered  
urge 2 plumb.

Dude, the terror there  
is lit w laughter—dude the arching  
& th' archer 2

Dude the creek is rushing,  
rushing | “give me but one  
firm place 2 stand”

<<*thought tho tender*  
*thought tho sprung*>>

GR]APES OF TH' OPP]OSITE OF WRATH : BEND ]OVERBEND ]BACK

I resent th' lily its bloom, I regret th' dawn of its loom  
I descend th' posture of stairs, put on airs, fight “fire”  
w th calm gaze of noon—huzzah— my eyes r “ashine”  
in th' “gloom” I limp w a glimpse of “astride” b outside  
in th' “open” too soon, sing thus: thee thine or cuss  
my hand at my back, th wind howls its vowels at dusk it  
calls something up, it “aflutter” or “startle” or “cup”

I beacon th excess of stars  
 w a stare w a glare of th grace  
 of a face, am forlorn in th dusk, dip my tusk  
 in a mare, (j/k we're all  
 geldings here) pair  
 pears w th' grins  
 of th flesh,  
 press leaf upon  
 leaf, under-leaf, leaf-thrust,  
 trust no utterance, cant carry  
 a tune.

\

save but for {regale me} save {face} 2 face  
 driven {2 what} {what have} have I {eye}  
 save but for {this} what. a thicket {grows}  
 around. {self-conscious in the wilderness  
 of my consciousness} 2 day: spare yellow leaves bracket  
 light : bright lichen on wet bark : fog low  
 in the holler descending : some internet  
 on th' internet : low drone of a small plane  
 {everyonceandawhile}overhead: {someoneelses  
 motion elliptical arnd me}: haze of all  
 & I {I} {1} a cusp in me {2} a bearing down  
 {3} soft th' tether, harness tho {4} save {but for}  
 a certain {glow}—

claim only the ape in apex, the prayer



in predator, lewd form in the quintet of stars. go forth my dogs,  
 slouch & play my dogs, hunting things in th dappld grass—  
 th blackberries of my eyes, my visions chosen pitch. I the lips  
 my fingers touch, go forth untriumphant & yet get thou,  
 get you, git I gallant, get thrashed, grasp'd & "had th' scent on"— this  
 & thus, & thistle lead {me} willingly, go. it gapes me. fuck w,  
 lathe me, as when it, bramble it nerve up, as when wood-  
 roses do shed their small petals {w just a touch} it shake them  
 down as when it galavant th' light down & parse &  
 leave it, there, laying there, hybrid in th' meadow  
 is the self I'd lay {willingly, or} claim,  
 laid, down u {thicket} a tangle in yr eyes—  
 & th' petals, well, let them {go}

--

Cody-Rose Clevidence's 1st book, *BEAST FEAST*, was released by Ahsahta Press  
 in 2014. They live in the Arkansas Ozarks with their dog, Pearl.

# THREE POEMS

Ruth Baumann

## MODERNITY

Inevitably bats gather in daylight

A cornucopia of bats / a heliopause of bats

Love was never simple so there are wars

But how impossible the task of target

A girl scrubs her wrists like a chalkboard

She knows no images will clear but

It's best to try anyway

## SWEET SEPTEMBER

I stood inside my head until evicted

O Autumn with vertigo O Autumn underfoot

eating feet commanding *Stay here*

*until red bellies turn yellow* There

is a type of breathing that whispers

*humans are interchangeable* O Autumn

with a chorus O Autumn twirling

new voices from my throat The inner workings

are remarkable They spare nobody

## POST-APOCALYPTIC BLISS

In Florida porches drenched

with frogs & katydids Of course

green knows its turn Time ticks

into a chandelier I've always loved

to break glass Come on I do love

Say no more sunset I prefer fog

I need weather that fits in my fist

--

Ruth Baumann is a PhD student at Florida State University & holds an MFA from the University of Memphis. Her first chapbook, *I'll Love You Forever & Other Temporary Valentines*, won the Salt Hill Dead Lake Chapbook Contest. Two other chapbooks are forthcoming: *wildcold*, from Slash Pines Press, & *Retribution Binary*, winner of the Black Lawrence Black River Chapbook Contest. Her website is [www.ruthbaumann.com](http://www.ruthbaumann.com).

# ["IF SELVES ARE THOUGHTS...]

Isabel Sobral Campos

"If selves are thoughts and the logic through which they interact is semiotic, then relation is representation."

It curves its lips. It must be a mouth.

It closes its lids and wriggles its opening. It rocks its bottom.

There are eyes and nostrils on its "face"  
And a round protruding coccyx

It circles around the meadow with a noticeable limp.

And meets an untimely end when mistaking deer for mountain lions.

The idealized world distilled into the contents of a shell found on the beach. (The child wraps her fingers on the spirals of brown and grey). The shell's content is both mind and matter. (The child asks the shell how far the ocean reached the edge of the sand-fields last night). What does the shell represent, if not the pattern of loss and retrieval undergirding the living and non-living? What passes for pattern on the body of the shell? (The child notices a resemblance between spirals in the shell and the tropical cyclone from the weatherman last night). There's something immoral there like the smokestacks guarding every city. Bateson would say: an understanding of our common patterns would yield a relation of love between humanity and its environment. Like knowing the broken link—the snapped umbilicus cord—continues to act in its finiteness and invisibility.

The sign on the poplar tree  
A traffic sign blown by the wind  
Hanging like a ripe fruit  
Spiraling down with dew  
The mammal impediment

Sometimes when misreading the signs  
Of recognizable life

I see the action of a sign

The internalized pasture

The moving spark

The shark's fin means something to the wandering man

The cloud says something to the lark

And I'm left hesitant by barking dogs

Whose nostrils respond to my moving uphill

Mental levels as spectrum of the real

The circular frequency of interaction between points

The return of the signal, the emitting response

The difference the sign makes

"One stone can alter the whole ocean"

I imagine his head bowing to the limits of the earth

The ocean is full of petals

Ungraspable tentacles and dreams

Convex and concave reflections

Multidirectional refractions

Oceans of abbreviated selfhood

Blobs of being in rock fissures

Centrifugal and centripetal forces

Conglomerates of competing intentions

Reproduction and feeding as purpose

Bioluminescent fishes in chromatic waters

The child in the feedback caress sparring with the shell's concreteness asks about  
the relationship of

today and tomorrow's shell. The shell remembered and revisited.

She knows the first shell was not the first realized shell.

--

Originally from Portugal, Isabel Sobral Campos spent the last decade on the east coast and recently moved to Butte from Brooklyn. Her poetry has appeared in *Horseless Press*, *Bone Bouquet*, *Gauss PDF*, and *Gobbet*, to name a few. *No, Dear* and *Small Anchor Press* recently published her debut chapbook: *Material*.

# TWO POEMS

Jacob Brooks

## SOME BUNNY LOVES ME

It is the season of the hungry Worm,  
the season of                      , season of  
\*\*\*flake,

                    Close-up  
on the hungry Worm's man-lips  
slurping onto the flaccid  
Animal it kills in the moonlight.  
Cycle triggered: Gales  
of dew, crotch and 409  
milk the applause of maples,  
semen oozing onto their trunks  
to dry in the wind, and secreting  
from telephone poles. In the livingroom  
we worship the patriarch naked  
with the vigor of our punk  
skin&impulses. Earlobes  
dangle, you orate over carpet,  
corneas shedding spores  
to spread your gaze: *Shedding*  
*Season* Burgeon, gelatin  
til pearl-jelly blots the woodpanel,

Us  
in your peripherals *Why*  
                    *is the wind*  
*trying to breed*  
*Us?*      we ask

a glistening wind,                      a thinking  
on icicles.      The carpet is home to our blood,  
  
the carpet      reminds us of loam

where outside the Worm sucks flesh  
in the mud.

[breathe deeply]

## DIRTY HONEY

Last night  
Our temporal worms nuzzled over time's Crust.  
I watched you walk away alone. Over the sidewalk  
Chafed with ice. Dots of tar on my epiglottis.  
Disclosing my throat as a filter,  
As a drain, as a bladder, as a tank.  
It's winter's pelvis and I stomp over pank  
To class, and dream of drinking glass.  
You were my salamander, my Kanga-  
Roo, tongues distending for tongue-touch,  
Ghosts lagging behind our bodies.  
Sperm-mote bowling through your blue tendril.  
Sole electron rolling down your slug-urethra  
Into the flower that kisses it back.  
My chest is a logic / is a dialogue of pulp  
Strapping me in sinews of sensation,  
Wrapping me in its canon all volatile night.  
The planet's slivers slosh with Godblood.  
We smell the blood, and it turns us on,  
And we're young, and the boys strip down on the dock  
And their big butts crash into the moon-white river.  
The world's clean cologne the smell of riverwater wringing  
Out of a boy's briefs onto the planks, and the trace  
Of summer day wear  
Subdued by river is what this poem smells like.  
If I could hold my love-soaked ghost to your nose  
This poem wouldn't exist.  
You were my Kanga-  
Roo / trufflebreath / truffleswelter. Leeches, my skin  
Contradiction. Seam of river and blood,  
Coil, itch, swim, and evolution.

The world as a ghost effusing out my Pinhole /  
The World as a ghost shaping its vessel.  
Twink in pinklight: both of us inspect the world's ligaments  
From the concerthouse. I want to kiss Him  
And kisses' idea threaded into windbreaker  
Limp on the hook, etc. Separating myself into cherry-coloured prisms,  
The storm having us as organs.  
I keep catching whiffs of a sweet / musky smell  
From somebod(y's/ies') bod(y/ies):  
Washing over the middle-aged straight couple in front of me  
/ Disclosing the honeypot in His underwear,  
Leaving its name [sticky trace] in my brainholes

--

Enigmatic. Resilient. Forever seeking to increase his pizzazz. Jacob Brooks' chapbook *ARTPORN* is forthcoming in Spring 2016 from Citizen of the World. He tweets @skinandimpulses.



# THREE FROM 'YIELD ARCHITECTURE'

Jake Syersak

---

architecture,  
dear architecture,

I just woke up from a dream in which I'd been throwing forget-me-nots into  
helicopter  
blades

this is what I'd wanted:

for "bluish" to arrive as "ish," unglued as though a window. enroll in service of the  
word  
*earth*, crack

like an x-ray through the sky's sleepwalking a robin's egg, its slick membrane

the sky is this: a slowly opening fold of: I don't know what I know, soft

as a comma's what I thrust myself into, unconscious splice of salty star-scatter

& is this making any sense, dear architecture?

—that we may misuse our glassy feelings

—that we may hollow what's left to pour out moonlight's broken bone

night's eyeliner the whites of our eyes we roll in a cloud's imbued

until aloud: dove. the *of* I'm folding into a wing of

---

architecture,  
dear architecture,

a friend writes, "the home is for screaming or no emotion"

& I've been an envelope of that for years now. how a paper plane ignores  
engineering

& takes flight anyway

what am I supposed to do with that? what am I, supposed to that? what am I,  
supposed?

I feel a glad hangnail's avalanche coming on, dear architecture, breathy licks

of blackbirds lace the grass

outside my window today in knots, how

as though a jewel, crystal

webs could stomach us yet still be in need of a good stylist. I could be facetious  
about a  
skeleton, incur & still forgive

what theory or machine what alive-economy hyphenates *you & I* into one voice  
can't

voice, dear architecture,

but that's no skeleton to live by

& it's getting hard to relinquish physics as a way of what divulges devastation

& how that hyphenates us human

because that's what I like I like a tongue's telephone wire

circling the built-unbuilt like a crescent moon's visual isn't

so invis-enviro of you

like the fluidity in cinnamons' curling swells a tongue to task. as means to an end.  
of what's so meaty, so celluloid of air

hug me from the inside like an iron lung, asphalt

it's getting hard to say the word *flower* anymore. let alone yield

---

architecture,  
dear architecture,

to begin, I've written two words side-by-side on yellow-lined notebook paper

: *violet; violence*

as a way of testing the bruises a colloseum's pillars bury into a hillside, how the  
grass gathers  
around it

(what anchors me in all this? —alarms of nausea. nausea the likes of which can only  
be  
described as: nausea describes

for example: I wonder, how calmly your waters hold a swan's gristle,

or how you occupy desire

—I occupy it by undertow. a lake's elastic. the seasick eyes of a gull latched  
landward, far  
from water)

I let sunset do the rest

dear architecture,

I have all the inclination of a dandelion's static. of pulling apart. *cotton-ball-esque-ly*

horoscopes coalesce so much of your own projection

& yet those teeth, there's a question there. of whether they'll nurse milkthistle out  
of liasons  
of meadows' darkmeat

violet's a traction of enamel over a lip. it purples a feeling of what the sun's doing,  
sinking  
down

totems into rosier folios. take it: these nauseous jaws, either as intro credits

or our animal film glued shut

*violet; violence*

the multifoliate bouquets. in spilled fuel. invisible suns tucked into rorschachs

"a violet's blue as a sign of distance"

what's ingrained

over what overbite is left

there are those who have long savored this distance as a choice view

--

Jake Syersak is pursuing a PhD in English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia. He is the author of *Impressions in the Language of a Lantern's Wick* (Ghost Proposal). His work has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Typo*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Colorado Review*.

# FROM 'WROUGHT'

Lily Duffy

At the gas station, a woman pulls up beside a pump, gets out of her car, unscrews the cap, bends down, and begins vomiting into her gas tank. Vomit slides down the wheel well and pools on the ground, the whole ordeal lasting several minutes. When she's finished, she wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist, gets back in her car and starts it. Sits there for several minutes, applying makeup in the mirror of her sun visor, before driving away.

At nine, I smelled like plasticky strawberries

At ten, poison and scalp

At fourteen, fruit punch on the neck, cherries and almonds on the legs

At sixteen, warm vanilla sugar

At nineteen, musky oranges left on a grill

At twenty, marshmallows and blunts

At twenty-two, other people

At twenty-four, maple syrup, or cologne, or a filing cabinet

At twenty-five, skin



A cruel game some guys came up with during a party I was at, wherein all the girls  
“who

had nothing to hide” washed their makeup off and lined up for the men to evaluate  
them

individually before convening to come up with a collective “order”—Most  
Different

Looking (ugliest) to Least Different Looking (prettiest), which they would  
communicate

to the female participants by physically moving them into that order before  
announcing

which end of the line was which. Particularly cruel about the game were the

circumstances surrounding it—everyone was drunk (no driving home), the

temperature outside was below freezing (no walking home), it was late in a very  
rural

part of the county (no calling a cab), and any girl who’d gotten a higher (uglier)  
ranking

knew she couldn’t put her makeup back on without risking teasing that, given the

circumstances, she didn’t have the emotional faculties to withstand at that time.

Particularly sad about that night is that if all the girls had trusted each other  
enough to

know that, even drunk, none of us actually wanted to partake, the game never  
would have

taken place, and the short girl at the unfortunate end of the line (who was actually sort of pretty and really didn't look all that different without makeup, and almost certainly did not look the *most* different without it of all of us; rather, she was just the chubbiest) wouldn't have felt like she had to let out an awful, forced laugh when we could all feel the sharp air she was taking in through her nose, in order to protect herself from further humiliation, and the face of the girl next to her wouldn't have gone disturbingly vacant, nor would the girl at the opposite end of the line yelling, in a voice much higher than her normal one, that it was "shot time" be the thing that allowed the rest of us to feel like we were physically capable of breaking from the shape we'd been fashioned into. After that night, I wore considerably less makeup, to parties and in general, and pretended to be convinced that something positive had come out of the experience. The girl whose face looked like she'd abandoned it got a tattoo a couple weeks later—it said "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" in green cursive across her stomach. She has several kids now, and when I saw her at a friend's baby shower a few months back, I was ashamed of the strong desire I had to ask if I could see it again.

“They had a real cloud over the stage and it followed this little girl; she ran into the  
fake  
well face-first trying to escape it. Now she has a scar where that soft divot  
between her  
neck and collarbone is.”

Find the plastic for my

Face on the floor every morning, after

I’ve slipped on it

Woke on the breakfast window seat, phoneless and wet

Now to collect:

shoes	(deep end of pool)
wallet	(lodged in bra's left cup)
keys	(hooked to the belt of a sleeping stranger)
phone	(missing)

Checking the bathroom when I notice I've been scratching my palm all morning. I  
look  
down at it—in smeared black ink: **LAUNDRY**

In the basement, buzzing at the bottom of a hamper (mosses of the grown). Palm

red  
for the rest of the day.

There were booths for the face—paints and clays, photos and plasters

Hats for the drinks and drinkers, a coat check for keys, credit cards for bonds

I bought a funnel cake iced with buttercream and ate it on a hay bale

Behind me, a handmade sign over a pile of vomit: FREE. Hot dog floating in the toilet

Here, every body parties—arrives to trash and become “trashed”

The purpose being to clear one of one’s self, to make room again

--

Lily Duffy is a recent graduate of the creative writing MFA program at CU Boulder. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bone Bouquet*, *interruption*, *smoking glue gun*, *Horse Less Review*, *Twelfth House*, *TENDE RLOIN*, and *Dusie*, among other places. She is originally from Maryland and lives just outside of Denver. With Rachel Levy, she edits *DREGINALD*.

# FROM 'BOOK OF SHADOWS'

Erin Lyndal Martin

I came back with perfume  
I had been to Herculaneum  
I needed to know the truth  
I needed flotsam and raisin bran

In Missouri I thought I could say it  
I was ready to pull over and say it  
I could have just fucking said it  
but I wanted to get the words right

I had to open the witch museum  
at the base of my throat  
I had to cut so deep  
in that vortex  
that bones got in the way  
the rest is simple circuitry

I could not find  
a way for you to understand

I had a fistful of dillseed  
wrapped in warped tinfoil  
I shook it on the ground  
Then the seasalt shook out too

& the movie marquee said Beware  
I thought it was just for me

the thicket by your house  
is dead till spring  
this is not my fault

I shoved your mermaid in a jar  
and put my clothes back on

the delta rush of gold  
bravely sauntered on unassigned

The causeway bridge over Pontchartrain  
I drove it myself  
with an ear infection and a book of stamps  
I drove it in the winter

back again with my mother  
and then with a man  
I didn't make myself  
I did not make myself a man

I sang to Pontchartrain  
the syllables dropped  
like weighted birds  
I had to take myself a bride

I wed the hudson  
in a funny light

my maw become a rope  
my fleshy parts a catacomb  
and still the vatican library closed  
what will I do

I idled behind a truck  
plastered with slogans for chicken fat  
I thought  
I might learn to waltz

in a hotel lounge  
there was never a boy  
who brushed his hair

there was never a boy  
who could do it twice

Then I took off the lace I wore  
then I could not brush



the lipstick off

it would not erase  
this is no decorum  
for the body

I took cachaca  
to the crossroads  
I held the bottle  
in my dominant hand

and tossed a letter  
in the stripey path  
& a man said Hey there,  
& a man said Hey there

seven years passed  
in a contusioned fever dream

now poised between two lakes  
it occurs to me how long it's been  
since I permitted plums  
tumbled at the graveyard's gate

I ride the bus  
with a copper bracelet  
and a cabernet sauvignon  
then drift to sleep in transparent colors

The ring I bought at the drugstore  
seems to be quite cursed  
I watch myself enact its machinations  
I am thinking of filing a complaint

The man on the phone  
was yanking his junk  
He exploded all over my voice

I turned to a man with kinder hands  
he said he was the man with kinder hands

he kept saying he was the man with kinder hands  
he would not shut up about his kinder hands

I said I valued silence  
he asked why I wanted to make this  
all about economics

I swear I wish the smell of sage  
didn't always make me gag  
there are people who will burn it  
just to shut you up

I have been reckoning with ghosts  
the fictional kind and the real kind  
I have been wondering  
how to tell the difference

In a dream last night  
I talked to you  
and I don't know why it matters  
if it was really you

some kind of egoic fingerprint  
embalms the cerebral cortex

now I have to change my name  
and hope that does the trick

I hope when I get old  
I do not remember living like this

--

Erin Lyndal Martin is a creative writer, music journalist, and artist.

# MODERN LIGHT

Candice Wuehle

And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
 And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
 And if this is a joke, the joke is that  
 First, I think maybe  
 The women were all just that bad.  
 Second, I think maybe  
 They were all good and not one  
 Of them was exceptional. Exception  
 Is the reason I am a Woman Traveller in Iceland.  
 On the incoming flight I looked through  
*Frankenstein: or, A Modern Prometheus*  
 For proof it was extra light drove  
 The doctor & his monster mad.  
 I want to know everything of light & madness  
 Throughout history:  
 I thought *I was mad myself but my own*  
*Doctor told me I had experienced*  
*An old light, an*  
*Untrue guide* the guidebook unhelpful on this matter,  
 This matter of madness in Iceland.  
 The guidebook informs me only that on  
 The issue of light in Iceland  
 The Woman Traveller may experience a sense of false  
 Safety.  
 Victor

Pursues his monster  
 Throughout the night and across  
 The Arctic Circle. It is always  
 Victor granted safe passage  
 By endless light and utter emptiness.  
 World as a hunting ground.  
 I think of the word: prey.  
 I think I hear words that aren't.

I think I hear doors open even in Iceland  
 I think *I hear the thin black chain*  
*Unlock* if this is a joke, the joke is that  
 Now *in Iceland and I want to escape*  
*Every kind of darkness.*  
*The kinds that come in long words: institutional, economic, academic,*  
*interpersonal.*  
*I came to Iceland to ignore my mail*  
 And I want to stay awake.  
 If this is a joke, the joke is  
 That *in Iceland I turn to the light &*  
*I meet fear like a living doctor.*  
*The exception about Iceland*  
*Is that all of the well-lit emptiness of*  
*Iceland is supposed to illumine the anti*  
*Darkness: the Space of Which is not X.*  
 All of Iceland is My Country for the Woman Traveller.  
 And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
 And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
 I think of the word: pray.  
*I think of the smell of gas from an unlit stove*  
*I think of the smell of light and*  
*I think of how I have to think of the word: X*  
*Before I think of other Long Words.*  
*X to invisible net as I to something vomited I never ate. No, heavy flashlight*  
*Always in my purse.*  
 I think how much I think.

I really do laugh for a while when I first arrive in Iceland.  
 Another Woman Traveller sends me a message:  
 You are the bad, bad bitch in my <3.  
 I blush, but  
 I do not even use the streets to walk, I walk the volcanoes,  
 I walk the cliffs, the black sand beaches, open empty meadows,  
 I walk the villages and I walk waterfalls, I walk hot springs,  
 I walk glaciers and geysers. I use all the hours  
 To walk and as if unburdened by time, also unburdened by space.  
 I'm always drawn onward, I'm never tired.  
*I forget that I am a Woman who came to Iceland because of insomnia.*  
*I forget all about X for a long time.*

*I forget the police, in Iceland I don't think there are any police.*

*I forget the black cans of poison I kept, in Iceland there isn't any poison.*

*I forget coming home everyday before dark that winter.*

For my summer in Iceland

There is no dark.

There is no dark.

There is no dark.

If jokes have a metaphysical quality

It is that they are understood in the body

Before they are understood in the brain.

If this is a joke,

The joke is that

I travelled up a steep mountain at night until alone

And turned to look back at where I had come from.

I turned to look at what

Men in Mary Shelley's era called The Globe Mansion, the

Wandering Space with no end of Wonders.

*Do you remember the*

*Dozens of parts in*

*Frankenstein in*

*Which the monster*

My body            cowers?

Looks at the light

Across the lake and the valley and the volcano.

It could see

So far.

*And no one could see it.*

*And it was there, the closest my body had ever existed in*

*Open Light Unending*

*, That I thought of X*

For the first time in Iceland,

*And if there is a joke*

*It's that on a mountain in Iceland my head heard a crunch and looked*

*Behind my body*

*Before*

*I remember*

*The sound of hard footfalls. I try not to laugh*

As I research all the female saints

That never did exist in Iceland.

No one can write down what they don't remember,

I think, as I read that *while many anchoresses exhibited  
Miracles worthy of Sainthood in medieval Iceland,  
The threat of rape from opposing religious orders  
Was too great a risk to their virgin sanctity to  
Make Their Glory Manifest*. It is easier to be forgotten by God

If you are forgotten by history,

Than by yourself.

I am only realizing as I write that I came to Iceland to try not to forget  
Myself.

This has to be a joke

And not a history or

A poem

Because a poem would have craft & a history would

*Be in a dark room somewhere*

*As myself slept and drunk*

*Myself out of myself so that if there was X I wouldn't exist.*

See, that's funny,

Now that I'm in Iceland, thinking about it.

And I'm not the only one:

When Saint Cecilia was forced to marry

She sang through the ceremony to take herself

Off the earth and into a higher plane

In which she would be wed to Christ.

Maybe it's also funny

To wonder what could really be known

Than to know a thing

Unspeakable

Anyway.

The world is so wide it is invisible in its eternity, is something possible

To say aloud as

I look out on Iceland.

I think of the monster made monstrous by a lack of context for his Own Life.

I think of Victor who created and kept secret the context.

I think of Victor stalking the monster and I think of the word stalk.

I think of this word's incorrect etymology: to remove a plant's stem of inner  
Structure.

I think of what it is to really be artless,

To create a context outside yourself.

I laugh as my self meets my monster and  
I get the joke.

*I look out on Iceland. I breathe in air without noise. I lean over and cup my hand in  
a stream running from a snowcap to a lake and drink its water. I look out under the  
sun's beams falling across my body in the middle of the night.*

And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
And there are no female saints in Iceland.  
Only women, anchoring.  
Globe Mansion, I think.

--

Candice Wuehle is the author of the chapbooks *curse words: a guide in 19 steps  
for aspiring transmographs* (Dancing Girl Press, 2014) and  
*EARTH\*AIR\*FIRE\*WATER\*ÆTHER* (Grey Books Press, 2015). Her work can be  
found in *Tarpaulin Sky*, *The Volta*, *The Colorado Review*, *SPORK*, and *PRELUDE*  
and is forthcoming in *The New Orleans Review* and *Juked*, among others. She is  
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Candice currently resides in Lawrence, Kansas where she is a Chancellor's Fellow  
at The University of Kansas as well as Poetry Editor for *Beecher's Magazine*.